Short Stories.

No. 708.) Week Ending July 26th, 1902. (Price One Penny.

"Still protesting, she was led from the church!"

(A Pathetic Incident from our Powerful Story, "Saved from Herself." See Inside.)

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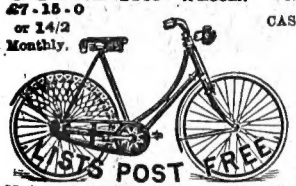

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SHORT STORIES

No. 708.] [ONE PENNY.

For the Week Ending July 26th, 1902.

SAVED FROM HERSELF.

A Story of Some Strangely Crossed Destinies.

By R. NORMAN SILVER, Author of "Hate, the Destroyer," "The Golden Dwarf," etc.

FIRST CHAPTER.
"I will Prevent this Marriage."

"Do not weep so, Rene, dear, after all, it may not be true."

The ruffled, golden head, buried despairingly upon a pair of girlish arms, was lifted suddenly. A gleam of hope came into the lustrous violet eyes, whose tears had overflowed their long lashes and wetted the soft, almost childish cheeks.

"Gwen," was the answer, "do you really think that, or are you trying to comfort me for a little while, only to make it worse for me afterwards?"

Gwendoline Bellasis bent over the large bare table at which she was working. She was as dark as her sister was fair, and her grave lips and clearly-cut features suggested a strength of character lacking in the dimpled, delicately-moulded countenance of Irene Bellasis.

"I don't see why you should take it for granted," she said, mixing a fresh tint from the rows of water-colour tablets beside her porcelain palette, "that a rumour is correct just because we happen to hear it. But there, if I were you and I did believe it, I wouldn't waste a single tear on the——"

Irene Bellasis started from her chair to put a protesting hand over her sister's mouth. "Please, Gwen, dear," she begged, "he is my husband, you know, whatever the Law may say."

Gwendoline kissed her. "I am sorry, darling," she replied, deepening the crimson petals of a rose in the flower-study before her, "but facts are facts, and when a man lays a diabolical plot to lure an unsuspecting girl into an invalid marriage, and then casts her adrift upon the world, he shows himself to be a scoundrel of the first order. And when he adds to that piece of villainy the contemplation of another, and this time, a real marriage with a woman in his own station—well, if I had been tricked and abandoned by him, I should feel more like shooting Victor Ashford than crying over him!"

Her sister sighed. "I can't look at it as you do, Gwen," she objected; "perhaps he never meant that the marriage should be invalid, his fine friends and relations may only have found afterwards that it was, and forced him into disowning me, and then into this—this engagement with Miss Dacre. She is his cousin, and the Dacre and Ashford estates join. He told me once that the marriage had always been urged upon him!"

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The artist threw down her brush. "Rene," was her response, "you are hopeless. But you are a child and I don't blame you. Yet when Victor Ashford married you in the back-parlour of an unfrocked curate who is at present serving a term of penal servitude for forgery, he knew what he was doing. When he was tired of you, and especially when he had inherited his uncle's fortune, he flung you off. Now it is reported that he is about to marry again. But even this crowning wrong—supposing, as you do, the report to be true—does not seem to convince you of his utter worthlessness."

Irene sank into her seat and hid her face, her shoulders heaving with convulsive sobs. "You don't understand, Gwen," she faltered, "he is my husband in the sight of God, mine alone, and I can't—I can't give him up!"

Gwen pushed away her work, got up from her painting-stool—a tall, handsome figure—and stooped to fold the weeping girl to her.

"My poor child," she said, "I think I do understand, in proof of which I will endeavour to find out for you whether there be any truth in this rumour. If there is, well, we shall be able to consider what we ought to do. There, don't cry, I won't breathe another word against Victor Ashford. If I could, I would bring him back to you that I might see my darling smile once more."

Her sister's arms stole round her neck. "You are good to me, Gwen," murmured Irene Bellasis, "and I am shockingly selfish—I do nothing but worry you and stop your painting. But I do wish—I—I——" A sob choked her; Gwendoline smoothed the golden head.

"Wish what, darling?" she whispered. Irene held up her left hand, and the tears blinded her great violet eyes.

"That I could put on my wedding-ring again," she said, "and have the right to wear it."

Gwen clasped her pitifully and the two were very silent. The light faded steadily from the narrow windows of the old Bloomsbury house, the August days were shortening fast. At length the elder sister rose.

"I must go out for an hour, Rene," she observed; "I—I have some materials to get. I won't be longer, though. Promise you will read a nice book and not mope."

Irene brushed the drops from her wet lashes, gave the required pledge, and sealed it with a kiss. There is often

a bond curiously passionate in its affection between women, such as Irene and Gwendoline Bellasis. Orphaned in childhood, both unquestionably beautiful, one weak but sensitive, the other strong while tender, nothing had come between them till Irene's hasty flight and secret—and invalid—marriage had separated them for a brief interval to re-unite them even more closely under the shadow of its tragedy.

Hastily donning her hat and a loose walking-jacket, Gwendoline picked up her latch-key—with a brave attempt at a jest—and descended flight after flight of dusky stairs to the street, itself shadowed by the huge Greek pile of the British Museum. She turned southward and westward into the broad roadway of Oxford Street. Here she hailed a cab and gave an address in the aristocratic quarter of St. James's. A vivid sunset glowed at the end of the famous shopping thoroughfare down which she was driven, its glow fell upon her face as she sat in the hansom, emphasising her air of quiet, almost lofty, pride and cool resolution.

The cab halted at the entrance to a block of flats whose rents were as high as its occupants were fashionable. Gwen paid the driver, walked up to the second floor, and rang at a small, heavy door with a gilt number on it. A male servant in a plain livery acknowledged her summons.

"I wish to see Mr. Ashford," she told him, "you may say Miss Bellasis—Miss Gwendoline Bellasis."

The servant's expression became wooden in its stolidity. "I am sorry, ma'am," he rejoined, "but my master is not at home."

Gwendoline surveyed him disdainfully.

"Then I will wait till he is," she intimated meaningly. The man bowed, her demeanour had convinced him that she was in earnest.

"If you will step in, ma'am," he answered respectfully, "I will ascertain when Mr. Ashford is likely to return."

Gwendoline entered the small, square hall, and passed into a bachelor apartment, heavy with the odour of tobacco smoke. The servant placed a chair for her and moved to go.

"You realise that I am determined to see Mr. Ashford," remarked Gwen significantly.

"Yes, ma'am," she was answered. And Gwendoline heard the sound of the other's departing tread. Everything in the room was indicative of wealth, the gold ink-stand on the writing-table by her, the silver-topped spirit-bottles and ash-trays, the Turkish carpet, the exquisitely-framed proof-etchings on the walls, betokened a luxurious taste, endowed with the power to gratify its predilections. Gwendoline frowned, it was here that poor Rene had spent her deceitful and all-too-short honeymoon.

Idly Gwen picked up a paper, to escape her own thoughts. She did not wish to lose her nerve. Her decision to interview Victor Ashford—without her sister's permission—had been a sudden one, veiled by a quite excusable fib. Hitherto her communications with him had been carried on through the medium of her solicitor; it was that gentleman who, some hours earlier, had conveyed to them the rumour of Victor Ashford's intended marriage.

Gwendoline started, and the paper she had been contemplating dropped from her grasp. Her gaze had fallen upon a paragraph. It read:

"According to the immemorial custom of the Ashford family, the banns of the forthcoming marriage between Mr. Victor Ashford and Miss Audrey Dacre were called yesterday in the Church of St. Bennet, at Liversedge, Somersetshire, where the ceremony will take place. The Ashfords have always followed this method of conferring to the marriage laws. It is believed that an Ashford has never been married by license or elsewhere than at St. Bennet's. By the way, Miss Dacre is now at Dacre Park near Liversedge, the bride and bridegroom's families being neighbours. Mr. Ashford himself will shortly go to Ashford Court, Liversedge, in readiness for the wedding."

So it was true! Victor Ashford, depending upon the reluctance of Irene to cause and face a public scandal, and confident in the invalidity of his marriage with her, was about to place it out of his own power to go through a second and binding ceremony with her. Gwendoline knew that upon the cherished hope of this, her sister had been brooding for months. Would she survive the discovery that its fulfilment would soon be impossible?

A shudder ran through Gwendoline Bellasis — she remembered Irene's pathetic cry: "If I could only put on my wedding-ring again!" She thought of the ring itself, laid away in tissue-paper, its wrappings moistened with bitter tears.

"He shall not do it," she exclaimed aloud; "I will not let him do it!"

"Who shall not do what, Miss Bellasis?" asked a mocking voice; "am I correct in concluding that the threat applies to your humble servant, Victor Ashford?"

Gwen sprang to her feet, a square-shouldered, clean-shaven personage, of medium height and dressed in irreproachable evening garments, stood before her. His small grey eyes, his florid complexion, his deep jaw and low forehead showed him to be all that she had imagined. She wondered how love could ever have blinded Irene to his obvious selfishness and brutality.

"You are Mr. Ashford," she said, "so your servant had been instructed to lie to me or to my sister if we should call? I guessed as much. Yes, I did mean you, Mr. Ashford; I know that you are going to be married again. It is a crime, you are my sister's husband!"

Victor Ashford smiled. "Fortunately," he rejoined, "the chain which bound me to that folly had a weak link. Who can blame me for snapping it?"

"That is false," declared Gwen; "you knew the marriage laws well enough, too well. You planned deliberately the whole fiendish piece of wickedness."

A gesture of indifference was Victor Ashford's response. "I have offered to provide amply for your sister," he said.

Gwen flashed out into passion.

"Never!" she cried; "never while I live—unless you will repair the treachery you have practised upon her."

Ashford snapped his fingers. "Impossible!" he replied; "but, as I informed you through my lawyers, any reasonable allowance——"

Gwendoline drew a deep breath. "I came here, Mr. Ashford," she said, "to humble my pride, and to beg you, for Rene's sake, to make her happy, to give her back her self respect. I hate you, I always shall hate you, but I would have hidden my hatred lest it should harm her. You not only refuse to do her justice, however, you insult us. Well, I will punish you. You shall not do as you intend. I will prevent this marriage."

Ashford's florid countenance grew purple, but he tried to sneer.

"You cannot," he retorted, "I defy you to do that. And if you did, it would not help your sister. All the scandal in the world would not get me to legalise our marriage—you would only torture her unavailingly. Be sensible, persuade her to accept five hundred a year, and to cry quits."

"You shall see what I will do," answered Gwendoline, contemptuously; "good day, Mr. Ashford." She turned her back upon him, went through the hall, and let herself out, her heart beating with anger and despair. A quick step sounded at her side. It was that of Victor Ashford—he had put on his hat and followed her.

"Listen to reason, you mad thing!" he exclaimed; "will eight hundred, a thousand a year do?"

"Not a million," said Gwendoline, and kept on her way in the increasing dusk of the quiet Court quarter. Ashford caught at her wrist.

"What am I to do with you?" he hissed; "you will ruin your sister's peace of mind and make a gazing-stock of her to

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no purpose. Curse you, I didn't count on your going blindly for revenge. Will nothing shut your mouth?"

"Repair the flaw in your marriage," she told him, "and I will be as silent as the grave."

"Never!" snarled Ashford; "I will see you and her——!" And he finished his sentence with an oath. Gwendoline shook off his hold, and would have hurried on, but he seized her hand again. "Be sensible, you fool!" he gasped; "you must, you shall strike a bargain with me."

There was an abrupt intervention. A powerful arm slipped between her and her persecutor, a grasp of iron was laid upon Ashford's shoulder, and he was thrown violently aside.

"Drop that, you blackguard!" said the new-comer, drawing himself up to the height of a good six feet, increased by a tall opera hat and a long dust-coat; "if this were Australia instead of England, I'd treat you to a good thrashing. But I don't suppose this lady wants a police-court subpœna from an officious bobby."

Victor Ashford bit his lip, muttered another oath, and slipped off under cover of the night. Gwendoline's rescuer raised his hat.

"Pray let me see you on your way a little," he added, lightly; "who knows, the scoundrel might molest you again. Some people seem to think—begging your pardon—that a pretty face is a sufficient excuse for thrusting their attentions upon its owner."

They walked on together as far as Piccadilly Circus, Gwendoline's companion chatting genially about the weather and the density of the traffic. She could not help noticing, in shy feminine glances, that he was a bronzed, well set-up fellow with a gallant bearing, and a free stride. In the Circus she stopped.

"I can get a 'bus here," she said; "thank you very, very much."

"Not at all," was the answer; "you'll repay me extravagantly if you will permit me to give you my card—I'm from down under, Australia, that is." And he produced his pocket-book, without waiting for her permission.

Gwen accepted the slip of paste-board, but did not look at it, and, to the Colonial's obvious disappointment, made no offer to disclose her own identity.

When she was safely seated inside the 'bus, she glanced at the card. It bore the name "Philip Ross," and the Colonial had found time to scrawl upon it the address of a London hotel.

SECOND CHAPTER.

"I Should Like to be Your Friend."

"How far is this place from Dacre Park? I suppose you could drive me over?"

Gwendoline Bellasis asked the question. She was sitting in the corner of a wide, low-ceiled room, at a round table with a snowy cloth upon it. Old sporting pictures, stuffed birds, and preserved fresh-water fish in glass cases decorated the walls about her, and the scented breeze blew in through the open latticed window, where the slant rays of the afternoon sunbeams crept between flowering creepers and trails of ivy.

Her attendant—a fresh-cheeked, country damsel, with short skirts and a white apron, curtsied.

"Yes, miss," she said, in the quaint accent of the Somersetshire dialect, "if you wanted us. But it is hardly worth while charging you for putting the horse to, Dacre Park gates is only about three miutes from here, past St. Bennet's Church on the other side of the road, and the avenue goes straight up to the house."

"Thank you," answered Gwen, gravely, setting down her cup and pushing away her plate, "then I think I will walk." And she looked at her watch.

"Dear me, miss!" exclaimed the waitress, "you've eaten scarcely a mouthful! Be you stopping here overnight, miss?" she inquired, standing with her hands on her hips in a friendly attitude; "because there's only one good train out of Liversedge this evening, and that's in half an hour. But perhaps you will be staying at the Park, miss, begging your pardon."

Gwen knitted her brows. "I shall not do that under any circumstances," she replied, "and it is plainly quite impossible for me to catch that train. Indeed, I did not count on doing so. You had better see about a room for me, and take my portmanteau upstairs. I rather anticipated having to remain in Liversedge this evening."

"Yes, miss," rejoined the attendant, and went away to execute her instructions. Gwendoline leant her head on her palm and pondered.

"Almost six o'clock," she said, "I have just time to get there before dinner, it would not do to leave it till afterwards. I wonder what Sir John Dacre will say to me. Will he hear me out, will he be sympathetic, will he be insolent, will he—oh, what is the use of wondering? I must go and put my fate—and Irene's—to the test."

She unfastened a small bag that swung at her wrist and spread its contents out on the table.

"So much for the proofs," she murmured; "his letters to her, his photograph, the false marriage certificate, her poor little wedding ring. They will—they must believe me."

Thus assuring herself, she restored the pathetic series of evidences to her bag. The short-skirted country girl had re-entered the apartment.

"I have kept a room for you, miss," she said, "and this is the visitor's book, if you will write your name in it."

She proffered the soiled volume and a pen. Gwendoline hesitated a moment, then took the latter and signed—a bold "Gwendoline Bellasis."

The waitress spelt it over admiringly and carried off the volume.

Gwen began to put on her gloves at the window. As she stood there, gazing out at the scene in front of the inn—it was a Saturday afternoon, and the benches before the door were crowded with stolid agricultural labourers chatting over their ale—a motor-car shot by down the road. In the driver's seat was Victor Ashford. Gwen drew a sharp aspiration.

"So the papers were right," she muttered; "well, what will be will be, I half hoped——"

She checked herself, buttoned her gloves, took up her parasol, and went out of the inn into the late sunshine. The drinkers on the benches stared at her amazingly as she passed them. Whatever her mission to Liversedge might be, she had been wise enough to lend it the support of a careful, even smart costume, and her graceful figure and fine dark features gave her an air of breeding, even of rank.

The waitress was evidently an excellent judge of distances, for exactly three minutes walking brought Gwendoline Bellasis to the gates of Dacre Park. She gained the head of the avenue, and rang at the great entrance under the pillared portico.

"Take Sir John Dacre my card," she desired the footman who appeared. The servant bowed to the ground. He imagined the hard-working young artist a chance caller of distinction.

"Yes, madam," he said, and escorted her with stiff gravity to a huge, old-fashioned reception room close by. Gwen sat down, for her knees were quaking under her, despite her calm exterior. A lapse of some moments allowed her to regain her equanimity.

A door opened and closed behind her, she rose and turned to perceive a tall, lean, frock-coated person, at once pompous and severe.

"Miss Bellasis," he observed politely, "I understand that you wished to see me, a request that I willingly grant, though I cannot recollect that I have had the —pleasure——"

"We—we meet for the first time, it is true," said Gwen, bravely, "but I have ventured to believe, Sir John, that you will hear me none the less patiently. I come on a serious, even a tragic errand."

"Indeed, indeed!" responded Sir John Dacre, conventionally; "pray be seated."

Gwen acted on the suggestion, and her host followed her example, crossing his legs in a formal, dignified pose. "Your daughter, Sir John," she began, "Miss Dacre is to marry Mr. Victor Ashford."

Sir John Dacre inclined his head.

"I—I— scarcely know how to tell you what I have to tell," she pursued, "but it amounts to this, that, by nine-tenths of the law, and every dictate of honour and justice, Mr. Ashford is already married—to my sister."

Sir John Dacre rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and the hard, cold caution expressed in his spare countenance, grew more pronounced. Gwendoline produced the contents of the bag at her wrist.

"I do not speak without proofs," she added, "here are his letters to her, here is his portrait, signed by him 'Your own true husband,' here is their marriage certificate—the certificate of an invalid marriage, I own, but a marriage in the eyes of God and society. My sister, Sir John, is a girl of eighteen, as delicate as she is lovely. Mr. Ashford's repudiation of her is breaking her heart; his marriage with your daughter will kill her. You are a father, and, no doubt, a magistrate—will you allow this match to go on?"

The other coughed. "Miss Bellasis," he said, "I gather that I speak to a very able woman, and I may admit that, with the exception of actual names, Ashford did confess to me something of a mock marriage into which he was inveigled, and I consulted my solicitor about the matter. Young men are proverbially fools, but that is no reason why they should ruin, by their folly, the plans of older and wiser folk. This marriage between my daughter and Victor Ashford is inevitable—it joins two estates and two fortunes that have been rivals for three hundred years. However, I recommended Ashford to make a reasonable, even lavish compensation; I understood he had done so."

"We refused it!" cried Gwen passionately, "we always will refuse it, till he does justice to her. Our lawyer advised us that, cleverly as Ashford worked through others, he may have rendered himself liable to criminal prosecution, and that, in any case, Rene could demand crushing damages on a breach of promise action. We will not bring it. I will not sell my sister, or see her sold. In time Victor Ashford's heart may soften towards his deceived girl-wife, he may, he must legalise their marriage. But he cannot if he marries your daughter. In Heaven's name, Sir John, for the sake of your own manhood and your own innocent child, break off this match."

Sir John Dacre thrust back his chair with a warning exclamation. A woman had just entered the room—a young woman, yet matured with a dazzling maturity. She was above the middle height, with a wealth of brown locks and a complexion of alabaster. She was dressed for dinner, and her neck and arms shone whitely in the late sunshine.

"One moment, Audrey," said Sir John, "I—I am engaged."

At the words Gwen started from her chair, flung herself at the newcomer's feet, and clasped her knees.

"You are Miss Dacre," she cried; "it is to you I must appeal then, as a woman to a woman on behalf of a woman. Miss Dacre, my sister is Victor Ashford's wife, not legally, because of the fraud he caused to be practised upon her, but his wife in your sight and the sight of all good and honest people."

Audrey Dacre released herself violently. "Oh, the little red-headed girl," she said. "Victor told me of her. What more does she want? He has done something handsome for her, I suppose."

Gwendoline staggered up. "You are a wicked, wicked woman, Audrey Dacre," she gasped, "and I could almost pray that you and your father may live to suffer as you are making Rene suffer. But I will not, I will leave you to your fate. As for Victor Ashford, I have not finished with him yet. Let me get out of here—I am suffocating; I know—I knew you would not do right by my darling, something told me! You are not human, you are fiends—let me go!"

She darted out of the tall French window on to the lawn, hurried like a wild thing through the long avenue, out at the gates, and down the road. Then her limbs failed her. She dropped and sank upon a gnarled stump on the grassy edge of a plantation whose shadows the setting sun threw far across the road and the meadows beyond.

Crouching on the felled tree-stump in the golden evening, Gwendoline covered her face and wept.

Unexpectedly she felt a hand on her shoulder, and glancing up, saw, to her utter amazement, the young Colonial who, a few days before, had delivered her from the clutches of Victor Ashford.

"Pardon me," he began, then stopped, staring at her. "The—the lady of St. James's, by Jupiter," he said, "I am glad to see you again, that is, I should be glad if I knew that you weren't in trouble, or unwell. Can't I do anything?—it would be a real pleasure and an honour—you never gave me your card the other night, in the hurry of catching your 'bus."

Gwen tottered to her feet indignantly. "You didn't—you haven't dared to follow me!" she exclaimed.

"Not for worlds," answered Philip Ross; "I have business in these parts, business that brought me all the way from Australia. But do take my arm, you look positively faint, and, to be honest, I've done nothing but think about you ever since we parted that night. I should awfully like to be your friend."

Gwendoline Bellasis recoiled. "Please," she begged, "leave me to myself, I shall be better soon. I have had rather a shock, that is all."

"Won't you let me see you again?" pleaded the Australian, almost boyishly. Gwen laughed hysterically.

"Yes," she said, "I shall go to church in the morning, at St. Bennet's, the parish church up the road there. If you go to church we shall meet. I must be there without fail."

"Thank you," answered Philip Ross, and lifted his hat. "Then I shall also be at St. Bennet's."

He walked off up the road, sauntered towards the inn, and ascended to his room. Here he threw open the casement, found a paper-backed novel, lighted a cigarette and puffed drowsily. He was thinking of his curious double encounter with the dark beauty.

So long did he puff and dream that at last he dropped asleep. When he woke it was twilight. He stretched himself and descended, his thoughts turning towards supper.

As he lounged down the passage he found himself fronting the partially open door of a bed chamber. Within, in the glow of a lighted candle, stood a woman—the woman he had met so strangely in St. James's and in the lane outside. She was bending over something and he saw her hands move. The light glinted on something bright—she was loading a tiny revolver.

(The conclusion of this tale appears in next Tuesday's "Short Stories.")

Ethel (who thinks her country cousin nervous): "Can't you find anything better to squeeze than a felt hat?" Country Cousin: "Wait a bit; I'm only reducing my energy for fear I might hurt you."

"Gil Tedge showed me his new book last night, and asked what I thought of it." "Is it good?" "No. The only attractive thing about it is the design on the cover." "What did you tell him?" "I said I thought it was bound to succeed."

He was a pretty little youngster, with little fat legs that stuck out beneath clean, stiff-starched clothes. "What are you going to do when you grow to be a man?" asked a visitor. The little fellow's face assumed an expression of earnest gravity as he responded with a voice which was evidently shaken by sad memories of the past: "Whip papa."

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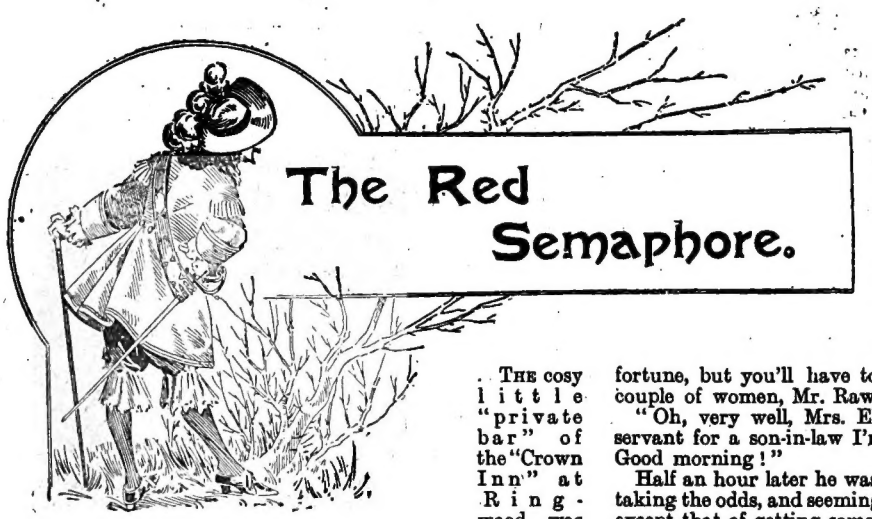

The Red Semaphore.

THE cosy little "private bar" of the "Crown Inn" at Ringwood was crowded.

Bookmakers, and representatives of the betting fraternity from London and from the neighbouring county town of Dunchester, elbowed one another, and made the almost primitive atmosphere of the place reek with "horsey" talk, and with worse than "horsey" expletive.

It was the first day of Ringwood races, the course being about half a mile from the village on the road from Dunchester.

Of all the crowd who were taxing to the full the energy and patience of pretty Madge Ellerton, one there was who, leaning with his elbow on the pewter-covered counter, with an air of semi-appropriateness, had apparently eyes and ears only for the handmaid daughter of the house. Living at Dunchester, five miles away, scarcely a day passed without his coming over to Ringwood, where he not only made hot love to Madge, but sorely disturbed the maternal peace of the buxom hostess of the "Crown."

Dick Rawson's occupation, or, rather, the lack of it, was a mystery to most people, for well, if somewhat flashily dressed, well fed, and well provided with ready money, he seemed to be over idle, to be always the man of means.

To the observant eye, he looked what he was, a dabbler in "prices;" a dependent upon his own wits. Mrs. Ellerton detested, because she distrusted him, and lost no opportunity of plainly hinting to him her candid opinion.

His personal appearance was not prepossessing. Of middle height, lean of feature as of figure, his light, lashless eyes had that shifty uneasiness which always creates suspicion in straightforward minds. He looked forty, and was probably ten years younger.

"Madge," he was whispering on this particular morning, "I shall want an answer from you to-day. I hear that signalman chap from the railway is making up to you."

"Will Varge? And supposing he is, Mr. Rawson, that would be his business, not yours!" she answered with spirit.

"I deny that! His love is nothing to mine; while I can give you ten times more, in comfort, in money, in everything, Will Varge!"

The tone of contempt in which he spoke his rival's name fairly roused the little beauty's anger.

"Mr. Rawson!" she said, almost loud enough for the others to hear, "I've known Will all my life. Of you I know nothing, beyond that which you choose to tell me. Well, since you have heard so much, I will tell you that Will Varge has asked me to marry him, and—and I haven't said no! That will serve for any answer you may want of me. Good morning, sir!"

By this time the crowd of racing men had melted away, Dick Rawson being the only one left.

He was about to reply to the girl; and, if his flushed face might be taken as a true index of his intention, none too politely, but was stopped by a voice at his elbow.

"Look here, Mr. Rawson! my girl's words are mine! We don't want you—nor your custom for that matter! We're only poor folk, and my husband has been fortune-hunting on the other side of the world for these last ten years. But see here! (and the excited dame flourished a letter before him) my George has landed in England again, and, please God! will be home to-day! I don't suppose he's brought a fortune, but you'll have to do with *him* now! not with a couple of women, Mr. Rawson!"

"Oh, very well, Mrs. Ellerton! If you prefer a railway servant for a son-in-law I'm sorry for your taste, that's all. Good morning!"

Half an hour later he was seen upon the course, laying and taking the odds, and seemingly oblivious to every other interest except that of getting something for practically nothing.

But in the midst of all the whirl and clamour, the cheating and the confusion, one dominant idea possessed him—to be even with the man who had come between him and the woman he wanted.

Love Madge, as a good man loves, he did not, for—he could not; it was outside his nature. To such a man, revenge—unreasoning revenge—comes easily, and grows without effort.

He did not go near the "Crown" again, but watched for some chance which should give him the points of the game.

About four o'clock he fancied that he saw Madge passing along a lane to the left of him, in the direction of the railway cutting.

It was in this cutting that the signal-box, in relief charge of Will Varge, was situated, a good mile the Ringwood side of Dunchester Junction.

The signal post, with its green semaphore at "caution," was clearly in view from where he was, but even as he looked the figure he was following with his eyes suddenly disappeared.

"I must have been mistaken! It couldn't have been her," he muttered to himself.

Then a boyish laugh immediately behind him made him turn sharply round. It was a youngster of thirteen or so on some bird-nesting or similar expedition bent.

"Hullo, Jim!" cried Rawson. "Anybody at home?"

"Only mother! Sis has gone to see Will Varge at the home signal-box."

"Then it *was* her I saw just now in front of me," said Rawson, carefully concealing his exultation.

"Of course it was!" said the lad. "She's gone to tell him about dad's coming home. The letter came after he went on duty. Five o'clock express he's coming by into Dunchester. The train passes Will's box at two minutes to."

Rawson had always made a friend of the boy, who was too young to see the wolf through the sheep's clothing. Jim was, therefore, quite ready to impart this wonderful bit of family news to the gentleman, who was always so over liberal in the matter of seasonable "tips."

He got one now—a brand new half-crown.

"My! You are a brick!" he cried. "I think I'll get back. There's a circus in Tarrant's field, and it begins at six!"

Rawson for a moment watched the boy as he ran at full speed back towards the village.

"I've got you now—both of you!" he said, smiting his clenched right hand into his open left. "By the company's rules no one is allowed in the box. No signalman, also, is allowed to leave his box. She's made him break one rule, I'll make him break the other. Then we'll see who'll win the odd trick and the pool! It won't be Mr. Will Varge, I'm thinking!"

* * * * * * *

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The intermittent ticking of the telegraph receiving in

strument in signal-box No. 52 afforded a sleepy sort of accompaniment to Will Varge's thoughts as he looked at his watch at twenty minutes to five.

He was a smart, good-looking young fellow, six feet in his stockings, and with the limbs of a Hercules.

"I'll go straight up to the 'Crown,'" he was saying, "when I go off at six. I hope that Rawson chap won't be hanging around. He's a bad 'un, I'll swear! He never looks you square in the face. I've got an idea he and I are going to have words afore long. Well," and Will drew a mighty breath and threw his shoulders back, "hard words break no bones, they say. I don't know, p'raps mine may, if I fling 'em straight from the shoulder!"

The line would be clear now till seven minutes to the hour, when the ordinary passenger train from London would pass the box, to be followed in five minutes by the express. Consequently Will had a few spare moments for musing purposes.

"As soon as ever Madge and I are married I'll take her away from Ringwood, and out o' sight of that wretched business. I hate a public for any girl—encouraging loafing blackguards like Dick Rawson, as only lives by swindling silly fools, with more money than wit."

Leaning lazily against the rear side of the box, he failed to see a dainty, sun-bonneted little figure making its way down the rough wood steps let in flush with the bank.

The front and two sides of the box were from breast-high upward, of glass, including the door. When, therefore, he heard a rapping at the door, but could see no one, he was, for a moment, puzzled.

Then, striding to the door, he threw it wide open.

"Why, Madgie!" he cried. "Who'd have thought of seeing you?"

Stooping down on the top step of the little flight leading up to the box from the ground was Madge, her eyes full of mischief, and her cheeks as blushingly red as any rose or peony in her mother's garden.

"May I come in, Will?" she said, getting up, and putting one pretty little foot over the sill.

"I'm afraid not, dearie," he answered her, hesitatingly. "It's the company's rule that no one's allowed inside. I'd get the sack if I broke it."

"Well, Will, *you* shan't break it, for *I* will," and before he could make further protest she was standing by his side at the lever rack.

He was too happy in her presence to chide her, and, seeing that she was overflowing with something to tell him, he just let her say on.

"Will! read that!" she went on, holding a letter right under his nose.

"Who's it from?" he asked.

"Father!"

"Your father! Why it's from Southampton!"

"Yes! yes! yes! he's come back, Will! And, though he doesn't say so, he *may* have brought a fortune with him! Read, you dear old silly! He's coming from Southampton by the express!"

The last word roused him to his duty.

"Stand back, Madge! The four fifty-three ordinary will pass in two minutes, and I must stand by," he said, catching hold of the "white" lever.

"Oh, do let me see how you work them, Will! I've always longed to know!"

"Sweetheart! if you do remain—which is a risk, for the inspector or anybody might come along. Keep quite quiet—don't speak a word, till I've got these two trains through."

He resolutely stamped his foot, and resisted the temptation to turn round and look at her.

Rattle! rattle! rattle!—p—r-r-r-r-r!

Just inclining his head to the left, he could see the "ordinary," overdue two minutes, sweeping along the two miles of "dead straight."

Back went the lever, and, with a grinding thud, the "white" semaphore dropped to "go on." Half-a-dozen seconds later the "ordinary" whizzed by, to gradually slow up into Dunchester.

Will Varge was in the act then of moving to close the door when a man sprang up the steps and put the weight of his body against it to keep it open.

It was Dick Rawson!

"I suppose," he said, with a cool sneer, "that I could get you into trouble for entertaining young ladies in your box while on duty?"

Two more minutes and the express would pass, and would need stopping; he could not bandy words with the other till the "red semaphore" was up.

"Miss Madge!" continued Rawson, "your mother has sent me for you; has asked me to take you home without delay."

"Will! it isn't true! Mother would not ask *him* to come even near me."

"That is very nice and polite of you," said Rawson, making a step forward into the box, "but——"

Will Varge never exactly knew how things came about after that.

To let go the "red" lever, and, with a cry of "liar!" to clutch Rawson by the throat was, however, the work of a second.

The impact was terrific.

In close embrace the two men rolled heavily down the steps on to the permanent way.

Rawson, though hurt by his backward fall, and struggling with all his might to loose Will's grip of his throat, was alive to a warning sound, every second becoming more and more distinct.

It was the express! The white cloud of steam just appearing as the train entered upon the two miles of straight.

Then Will heard it.

"Madge!" he shrieked, "pull the 'red' lever! Pull hard, for God's sake!"

The girl was paralysed with fear. Will's voice seemed to come through miles of space.

Only a mile away now.

"Madge! Pull the 'red' lever—now!"

The last word, shot out with all the remaining force of despair, reached her. She woke to a realisation of the truth.

Will—her Will!—in deadly struggle right in the path of the oncoming express; the passenger train waiting still in Dunchester Station—her father's life, too, in peril!

She could almost feel the hot damp steam of the express engine on her cheek.

Staying no more to dream or think, she seized the "red" lever, and pulling it back with all the strength of her little arms, she heard the semaphore "lock-up" into its place.

Then she fainted.

The express pulled up within a score of feet of the two men, Will uppermost, his fingers still on Rawson's throat.

One of the passengers by the express, a big, bearded, elderly man, accompanied the guard to see what was the matter.

"Why it's Will Varge!" said the passenger.

Will heard him, and pointing to the signal-box, said—"You had better go to Madge, if you are Mr. Ellerton!"

The father found his daughter unconscious in a heap on the floor of the box, by the lever handles.

It did not take him long to rouse her, and on the journey home she told him the whole tale, and how that she was to blame for tempting Will from his duty.

However, nobody blamed her much; not even Will, who, as he had prophesied, was discharged from the company's service.

It is satisfactory to know that Dick Rawson left Dunchester for London soon after his encounter with his rival; the latter place offering him a wider field for the shady operations in which his soul delighted.

As Mr. Ellerton returned with even a more than fair "pile," the order soon went forth for an evacuation of the "Crown Inn," and for the building of a comfortable house on the site of the cottage where he himself had been born.

Madge and Will were to be married on the day the house was finished. The happy pair were then to sail for the place in Queensland, which Mr. Ellerton had left for his native land.

Ralph Enderby.

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A Frustrated Elopement.

Told by a Britisher who Lives in Texas.

NELLY WARDEN was the belle of James County; there could be no doubt of that. Some said in the whole of Texas, but that was more problematical.

No one denied, however, that she was one of the prettiest little maids that ever stepped, —laughing blue eyes, roguish red lips, and a skin with just the least touch of brown where the fiery Texas sun had kissed it. And there wasn't a boy in the section that wouldn't have given his right hand for that same privilege. But she would have none of us, though goodness knows we hung round the Warden ranch in a most disgustingly obvious manner. Her three big brothers never wanted for chums, and her poor old father positively couldn't move without having some of Nelly's suitors buzzing round him. For, you see, we were all so keen on getting her, that we couldn't afford to let the other fellows steal a march on us by making friends at court. But in spite of all our efforts Solomon himself couldn't have told which one of us she favoured—if she favoured any one at all.

She had a laugh and a smile for every one of us—but as to a preference! Some of the married men, just to worry us, used to say that the right man hadn't arrived yet, and we boys would feel for our pistols and hint that if he wasn't a born and bred James County man, the stranger would find things unhealthy for him.

There were, I should say, about eight of us boys who wanted to marry Nelly Warden, and, in spite of our rivalry, we were all pretty good friends. With one exception. He was Juan Sola, a Mexican from over the border—a regular fiery Spanish "greaser" of the old style. He was a magnificent horseman, and to see him come thundering up to the Warden ranch—big silver spurs, silver-worked saddle and bridle, and jaunty hat—made us fellows green with jealousy when we thought of our sorry steeds and string and leather equipment. Still, Juan didn't get on any better than the rest of us. He was always welcome; so were we. He stopped to dinner or tea; so did we. And he went away no forr'arder.

But as time went on we began to notice that the Mexican was not exactly contented with the progress he was making in his wooing. His was one of those impetuous natures which brook no obstacles, and it galled him to think that he, Juan Sola, owner of a big ranch, the handsomest man in the border, who could have had any dark-eyed Mexican señorita he chose for his wife, could not make headway with the little blue-eyed Nelly Warden. And we saw that he scowled blackly at times as he rode home over the border.

And so the days passed away, until one night Jim Warden—that was Nelly's eldest brother—came to my shanty in a high state of excitement.

"Dick," said he, dropping into a chair and mopping the perspiration from his face. "I've got a most extraordinary bit of news for you. Juan Sola is going to elope with Nell!"

"Elope with Nell!" I roared. "You mean she's going to marry him? Has she——"

"Steady, old man," said Jim, with a smile. "Perhaps I didn't ought to have put it that way. But now listen—I'm serious. I was down at San Roca about some horses to-day, and who should I meet there but Pete, one of Sola's servants. You remember him? The man I dragged away from that mad bull last year."

I nodded.

"Well, the old chap seemed confused at seeing me, and it seemed to me somehow that he's got something on his mind. At first, when I asked him what was amiss, he tried to pass it off, but then he suddenly turned to me and told me that he wouldn't have it on his conscience to deceive a man who had saved his life. Of course I asked him what on earth he meant about deceiving me. Then out came his whole budget. I promised him I'd see he didn't suffer, and came straight on to see you about the business. To put it in a nutshell, what he told me was this: His master has got tired of hanging round Nelly without result, and he has resolved to kidnap her, take her across the border to one of his *estancias* in the mountains, and there get a priest to marry them, while we're hunting around for our poor girl."

"Good heavens!" I cried, for although wild doings took place on the border, I had never dreamt of anything quite so comprehensive as this. "And when does this game come off?"

Jim leant forward.

"To-morrow night, my boy," he said impressively. "Juan Sola and two servants are to wait for Nelly as she rides across to Mellor's for her music lesson. She always goes alone, as the villain knows, and the job can be done as easy as winking."

"She mustn't stir out, that's all," I said hastily. "Great Scott! what can we do to the fellow?"

"My dear chap," said Jim, "if we simply content ourselves with keeping Nelly safe under lock and key we can do *nothing* to him, because we lack proof. But I've got a scheme."

He broke off and chuckled.

"Out with it, man!" I cried, for his merriment nettled me.

"We must go through with the kidnapping business, that's all!" he said, becoming suddenly sober.

"What! Let Nelly get taken!" I cried.

"Yes, and no!" said Jim, his eyes dancing with merriment at my bewilderment. "Juan shall kidnap somebody, if he can—*but it won't be Nelly.* See?"

"I'm hanged if I do!" I said. "Who should he take, if not Nelly?"

"We'll provide someone," said Jimmy. "You blockhead! Don't you understand? Somebody must play Nelly, for this occasion only. Then when our gay Mexican rides up to start his girl-lifting lay, we chime in and trot out *our* part of the play. And, by Jove!" he added grimly, "I've got some mighty pretty lines in my act!"

Dawn was now breaking in upon me.

"But who is going to pretend to be Nell?" I asked. "It's going to be a mighty unhealthy part. Sola's not a man to stand any monkey tricks, and he's very handy with his guns."

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"I know," said Jim. "He's a dead shot, and he's more than likely to get mad when he realises he's been fooled and won't be able to show his nose this side of the border again. It can't be a girl, Dick, it's too risky. She'd be just as likely to stop a bullet as one of us, if I know anything of the greaser."

"Yes," said I. "That rather beats us, doesn't it?"

"Not a bit of it," replied Jim. Then he looked at me critically. "I've got it!" he cried. "*You* shall play Nelly, Dick!"

"Me!" I said, and my voice was so strange that Jim roared again.

"Yes—you," he continued. "You've got a slight, girlish figure, my boy—don't hit me!—your face is innocent of hair, and you'll make an A 1 girl when we've done with you. We'll borrow one of Nell's gowns and her big flop hat, and a wig out of the box we had for the theatricals last spring, and your own mother wouldn't know you."

"Don't talk rubbish, Jim!" I said, hotly. "Do you think I am a fool? What sort of freak should I look got up like that?"

"We're playing for a big stake!" said Jim, becoming grave again; "and if we come out all right you ought to stand in for something. I like you, Dick, and I should like to see you get our Nell. Don't you think if you and I pull this through it'll send you up in her estimation? You do as I tell you, my boy, and I'll be your best man yet."

From that moment I was as wax in his hands.

* * * * *

The time had come. Miss Nelly Warden, otherwise Dick Travers, attired in her pretty blue print gown, and her big flop hat, which effectually concealed her face, set out on her black mare to ride to the house of old Ma'am Morrell, who gave music-lessons. Miss Nelly rode side-saddle—but between you and me I found it confoundedly uncomfortable, and my gown wouldn't set right somehow round about where I had got my two trusty six-shooters tucked.

I didn't feel happy. I knew that away down the trail somewhere Jim and Tom Warden was waiting, their pistols on the cock. The old servant had told Jim pretty exactly the spot where the ambush would be laid, and Jim and Tom had arranged so as to be on hand when wanted. Still, things might go wrong, and if so I stood to get a couple of leaden pellets through my head instead of leading little Nelly Warden to the altar. For Juan Sola had a way of shooting on sight when he got mad, and then his vicinity became distinctly unhealthy.

Hark! What was that? A scurry in the underbrush, a rush of men and horses, and a cloak had been thrown over my

"I threw off his grasp and sprang to my feet, drawing my revolver as I did so."

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head and I was dragged backwards off my horse to the ground. Some very unladylike exclamations which I let drop as I struggled to escape were fortunately lost in the confusion.

Then came the thud of hoofs, and I heard Jim's voice demanding what was amiss. For answer came an oath in Sola's voice, and a rough command to stand out of the way.

"What's that behind you?" cried Jim. "Great heavens, you villain, is that my sister?"

Apparently he made one step towards the Mexican, who threw out his arm and fired at him, and with a groan poor Jim dropped. Quick as lightning Tom Warden fired on Sola, but missed, and I began to think it was time I assisted in the fighting. I was lying on the ground entangled in the horse-cloak, and as I struggled to rise Sola suddenly seized me by the arm with the intention of pulling me to my feet. In the darkness he had not yet discovered the deception.

I threw off his grasp, and sprang to my feet, drawing my revolver as I did so. A strange figure I must have looked standing there in my blue skirt. My big "flop hat" hung round my neck by its ribbon, and my wig had fallen off.

One searching glance the Mexican threw at me, then he realised the truth.

"Fooled!" he shrieked, and let drive a bullet at me. I had ducked at the flash, but a hot, tearing pain in my left arm told me that his aim was good. I fired at him, but missed him badly, and in a second he had mounted and turned to fly, his two servants riding beside him.

"Mount and after then," roared Tom, who was fat and heavy. "I must look after my brother."

I needed no further incentive. I leapt on to my horse—Nelly's horse—and in a moment I was after them. My mare was fresher than theirs, and I gained rapidly on them. Suddenly, in obedience from an order from Sola, one of the servants turned back and rode at me, but a bullet from my Colt took him in the shoulder, and he rode off howling in a direction at right angles to that in which we were galloping.

The second servant was apparently in a terrible panic, and at last he swerved off and left his master alone. Sola, seeing this, turned in his saddle and fired after him, making the silent woods ring with oaths. And all the time I was gaining on him. I knew that if he once got behind a rock there he could pick me off at his leisure, and so I strove my hardest to come up with him, paying no heed to my burning wound. Just as he turned to the corner, and stood outlined for a second against the blue night sky, he turned and fired on me, and our bullets crossed. He took me just above the knee, but mine hit him somewhere under the breastbone, and he pitched out of his saddle heavily. I rode cautiously up, but when I saw his face I knew that the danger was past. Juan Sola was dead!

* * * * *

Quite how I got back to the town I do not know. I must have fainted from pain and loss of blood many times, but the good old horse pulled me through, and carried me safely to the Warden ranch, where Tom, carrying his badly wounded brother, had arrived long before. By the time I arrived the whole story of the frustrated elopement was public property, and great was the rejoicing when I turned up alive, though damaged, the general consensus of opinion having been that when I set out to pursue the Mexican and his two servants I had gone on my last ride.

So poor little Nelly had her hands full, with two great invalids to look after. Jim got better sooner than I did, having only a bullet-track across his ribs, but that was to my advantage, seeing that when he got better she was free to devote more time to me. She made me tell her all about my chase, and how I felt in her gown and hat. I told her a good deal more, too, a good deal that wouldn't interest you, perhaps, But when we told Jim the result of our conversation, of course the silly idiot must slap me on the back, and roar out—"I told you so, Dick! I told you you stood to get something good out of the business!"

As I often tell little Nelly, I did.

Victor Pitt-Kethley.

WHEN IS YOUR BIRTHDAY?

(See Editor's Chat.)

July 22.—A fortunate birthday; good for health and progress in domestic affairs. Benefit will be derived from friends.

Those born in the early morning and from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. will derive the most benefit, but will have some anxiety over love affairs.

A child born to-day will be fortunate, will possess original ideas and good judgment; will be ambitious, fond of change and the uncommon.

July 23.—The indications for a birthday to-day are good for money and business. Much activity; health favourable, and speculations should go well.

To the young courtship and marriage will soon come, especially if born before noon. Girls born after then will have some peculiar experiences in love affairs.

The day is good for marriage, pleasure, and visiting.

A child born to-day will be active, cheerful, and a pleasant companion. Fond of fun, pleasure, and the opposite sex. Very artistic if born in the morning.

July 24.—Not a fortunate year for those whose birthdays come on this day. Sickness and an unsettled time are approaching.

Favourable for those born between 7 and 11 a.m., especially clerks, teachers, and professional persons. Bad for landlords and farmers.

A child born to-day will be of a peculiar disposition and hard to understand. Fond of change. Better for a male than a female.

July 25.—A year bringing many ups and downs and little progress for those who celebrate their birthdays to-day. Don't risk much. Guard against loss and damage to premises.

Rather fortunate for farmers; and persons in employ may be promoted. Lovers will have cause to grieve, many crosses and much deceit.

To-day is evil for dealing with young people, and ladies generally. Ask favours about 7 p.m. Beware of mishaps near 10 p.m.

A child born to-day will be ambitious and proud. Free with money and not very fond of work. Should keep in the employ of others.

July 26.—Clerks and literary persons born on this date will have anxiety, and young girls will need care in love affairs. Those in business will do well with care.

The day is good for dealing with professional persons, seeking work, and buying, especially from 4 to 5 p.m. Evil for signing papers after then.

A child born to-day will be rather fortunate in business, will be quick and clever, though a bit abrupt and crafty, possess a quick wit.

July 27.—Indifferent health is probable this year to those born on this date. The day is unfavourable to business and domestic affairs. Mind unsettled and inclined to change.

Farmers, dealers, builders, and aged persons will have an anxious time. Girls will meet many obstacles in love affairs.

A child born to-day should keep in employ. It will be clever and inventive, but suspicious, reserved, and lack self-confidence.

July 28.—This day brings anxiety in business; go carefully to avoid loss. Don't speculate or lend money. Give extra attention to the health.

The day is evil to speculate or ask favours. Good to do with military men, doctors, and engineers near 6 p.m. Guard against chills.

A child born to-day will be active, generous, and affectionate. Rather fortunate and enterprising. Apt to be too free with money.

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THE CONFESSIONS OF CYNTHIA.

Revelations in High Life by a Lady's Companion.

The writer of this series of true stories acted for many years in the capacity of lady's companion to a Society adventuress who lived by robbing her unsuspecting guests. Names have, for obvious reasons, been altered, but the facts are correct.

THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS:

Mrs. NORTON	An adventuress who makes her money by robbing her friends.
CYNTHIA	Her cousin and companion who, when the events related below took place, was quite unsuspicious of Mrs. Norton's guilt.
FLUFFY	An accomplice of Mrs. Norton's.
LORD KINROSS	One of Mrs. Norton's most devoted admirers.
SIR JOHN STRICKLAND	A poor baronet who is deeply in love with Mrs. Norton.
MARY VERNON . . .	At one time engaged to be married to Lord Kinross.
HIRAM PETTIGREW .	An American millionaire.
PERCIVAL HOPE . . .	Pettigrew's secretary.

Mrs. Norton. Adventuress.

Cynthia: Her companion.

THE CLIMAX DRAWS NEAR.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF NEW READERS.

CYNTHIA tells in the opening chapter of her arrival at her cousin's in the capacity of companion, and of her discovery that Mrs. Norton is taking part in midnight card games, at which large sums of money are being lost and won. The climax is reached one night when Mary Vernon stakes her diamond ear-rings (a gift from Lord Kinross) and one of the onlookers finds them to be paste. Mary Vernon declares that they are exactly as given to her by Lord Kinross, whereupon Kinross breaks off the engagement. The diamonds subsequently appear as a gift from Fluffy to Mrs. Norton, set in a pair of hat-pins. A few weeks later the notorious Mrs. Norton, with Fluffy's help, succeeds in stealing a pocket-book, containing about eight thousand pounds in paper money, from Hiram Pettigrew at the Café Regal, by substituting for the millionaire's pocket-book one exactly like it. Later on Cynthia discovers the original pocket-book, empty of course, in one of her boxes. Not knowing what to do, she confides in Fluffy, who is very kind, but makes her promise to say nothing at all to anyone else on the subject. He takes charge of the duplicate pocket-book. Mrs. Norton now moves into her new house in Pont Street, and it is while here that Sir John Strickland, a poor baronet, proposes to her. She refuses, but hints to him that if he will consent to allow his name to appear on the directorate of certain companies he will be bound to make money, and then her answer might be different. Mrs. Norton is next presented at Court by her friend, Lady Gaveston. For this function she wears some superb diamonds which have been lent her by Lord Kinross. The Society papers declare her to be the most beautiful and best-dressed woman at the presentation. The same evening Lord Kinross calls at Pont Street for a private interview, and it is during this interview that Percival Hope enters the room unannounced, and makes the startling statement that Mary Vernon has discovered the thief who stole her diamonds. Shortly afterwards Mrs. Norton leaves the room, Cynthia however stays, unknown to Kinross and Percival Hope. While there she overhears Hope, who turns out to be Kinross' cousin, tell Kinross that in a fortnight's time he will prove to Kinross that Mrs. Norton is an adventuress living upon the proceeds of the robbery of her friends. Cynthia tells Mrs. Norton what she has overheard.

FRANKIE listened to me unmoved, until I mentioned that Kinross had alluded to Percival as his heir-at-law.

"Kinross said Hope was his cousin, and his heir? Are you sure, Cynthia?"

"Quite."

"But the difference in name, what of that?"

"Percival told Kinross that when he took the name of 'Hope' he had succeeded to a good deal of money, more than he was likely to spend. I suppose he was adopted by some rich relation."

"I remember hearing some talk that a connection of Kinross had changed his name. To think it should be Percival Hope—Pettigrew's secretary. Tell me, Cynthia," she cried eagerly, "did they mention *him* at all—the American, I mean?"

"Not a word. They spoke chiefly of you. Hope declared that within a fortnight he would prove you were——" I paused. I simply couldn't repeat the conversation in cold blood.

"Don't be squeamish, Cynthia. If I don't mind, you needn't. I suppose Hope said I was an adventuress?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?" she glanced at me keenly. "For Heaven's sake don't keep me in suspense," she cried, "speak."

"He said you were a swindler existing on the proceeds of nefarious transactions, and that you duped people. He declared you were leading a false life, under a false name, that you had never married Richard Norton at all."

"And then——" panted Frankie. "Did Kinross strike him, did he sit still and listen to such lies?"

"I didn't wait for Kinross, Frankie. I told Percival Hope what I thought of him myself."

"You? Why, Cynthia, what made you do it?"

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"It wasn't very likely I could sit and hear you abused without defending you, Frankie. I think I made him feel ashamed. I said I had been present at your wedding, and suggested he should write to the Consulate at Bruges, or question Lady Gaveston if he didn't believe me. I went for him like anything, Frankie, and at last he acknowledged you were really Mrs. Norton."

"What of his other accusations? Did he retract them?"

"No. I told him about your estate in Jamaica and Lord Kinross backed me up. But he would not retract a word. He even dared to say he would prove his assertions if I would wait a fortnight. Of course I wouldn't listen to that, but started to fetch you."

"Who stopped you, Cynthia?"

"Hope. Oh, Frankie, imagine what he said, he declared that if I told you what he had been saying, he would deny it all, and accuse me of making it up."

"Was Kinross sorry?"

"I don't know. I said some nasty things to him as well as Percival. I told him I wished he'd go away and not come back. I said I couldn't understand what you found to like in him."

"Why Cynthia, you must have been a perfect termagant. Tell me," she looked curiously into my eyes, "you used to like Percival Hope a little?"

I nodded, the subject was a sore one.

"He cared for you, didn't he, Cynthia?"

"I think so."

"And yet you treat him like this! Simply rave at the poor man. At the very moment too, that you've learnt he has an income too large for him to spend—alone. Why on earth did you do it, child? Don't you see you've spoilt your chance?"

"I don't understand you, Frankie. It seems to me I never do. I used to like Percival Hope, I—I can't help liking him a little even now, but neither he nor anyone else shall say bad things of you in my presence."

"But why, child?" she asked again. "How does it affect you, if they speak ill of me?"

"You are all I have in the world, Frankie. The only person there is for me to love. Shouldn't I be mean, base, and disloyal to let anybody speak against you?"

"I haven't been particularly kind to you, Cynthia. I really don't see why you should care for me. Still——" with a sudden movement she put her arms round me.

"You are a little fool," she said softly. "It doesn't pay to be fond of anybody, but oneself. It certainly won't pay you to be fond of me." Then, with a sigh, "I might have been nicer to you, Cynthia. I wish——" she broke off and kissed my face and hands with a strange tenderness. "I am sorry," she said, "oh, I am sorry——"

"Are you going back to Bruges," she asked presently.

"Not if you want me, Frankie."

"If you do, Percival Hope will follow; you'll forgive him and——"

"I don't mind about Percival or anybody else, Frankie. I am quite content to be with you if——" I paused.

"What is it, Cynthia?"

"Be fond of me sometimes, that's all."

"I always said you were sentimental, Cynthia," she laughed. "You want to make me as bad. Now," she rose, "you must go to bed, it's late."

"Shall you speak to Hope, Frankie, and make him apologise?"

"What's the use? You say he would deny everything. I shall just ignore him and all his works. Kinross is quite right, Hope speaks against me for his own ends. He doesn't want his cousin to marry. He desires to remain the heir-at-law."

"Frankie, you don't *really* care for Lord Kinross?"

"That's the person I care for, Cynthia," she answered, pointing to her reflection in the glass. "Lord Kinross can look after himself, my dear, there's no need for you to worry."

"And Sir John?"

Frankie looked grave. "I think you can trust me with Sir John," she answered.

And with that I was forced to be content.

Lord Kinross looked in for a little while the next day. His relations with my cousin seemed unchanged, his attentions were marked but indefinite. He contrived to get a few words with me before he went.

"Please forgive me, Cynthia," he said softly.

"For what?"

"Let us say for existing. I know you grudge me the right to live. Won't you be friends?" He smiled and put out his hand.

"Like your lordship, I'll make up my mind when Mr. Hope returns, in a fortnight," I replied.

Lord Kinross had the grace to blush.

The next afternoon was our "At Home,"—our first in Pont Street. By this time our visiting list had grown, men used to crowd round Frankie when she drove in the Park, and smart women dropped into lunch.

Lady Gaveston had routed out all her acquaintances, pious people most of them, of good family, with plain daughters and dull sons. To all these Frankie had dispatched "At Home" cards. Some of the folk we had met at Lady Winchin's were requisitioned; also Mrs. Curtis-Blount, and my old friend the pink youth. The men invited certainly outnumbered the women, but if the latter were few, they were, as Frankie said, well chosen, and the rest would follow. Lord Kinross had promised to bring his sister Paula, and Mary Vernon was sure to come. She had answered Frankie's letter with a pretty little note of thanks, but had not yet been to see her.

The rooms looked lovely, Frankie and I decorated them with lilac, laburnum and white narcissus, and Sir John—frightfully busy of late—sent us a sheaf of lilies and a whole lot of roses.

I got dressed early and went downstairs to watch for first arrivals.

Lady Gaveston was seated in the drawing-room, cased in a gown of satin spiked with jet. She was worrying some soft white wool with a pair of hungry-looking needles—knitting she called it.

She stared at me through her glasses. "That's a pretty frock, my dear," she said at last.

"I'm glad you like it, Lady Gaveston. I think it's sweet myself. Frankie has beautiful taste."

My lady clicked her needles and slightly sniffed. My dress was of pale yellow silk falling in pleats from the waist. The bodice was cut without a collar band, and showed my neck above a *bertlie* of soft lace, caught into place by a knot of roses, deepest, darkest crimson.

Frankie was gowned in one of her most triumphant toilettes. She wore a canvas of a pale shade of brown—biscuit colour best describes it, with a silk underskirt of *eau de nil*. The dainty fabric caught the shimmer of the silk and gave it a wonderful green effect. The skirt cut very long, was embroidered in *motifs* of blue cloth and silver. The bodice was a confection of silk and lace, with a suggestion of a zouave in blue and silver. A delicious belt of turquoise completed the costume.

Mrs. Curtis-Blount was the first to arrive. She wore mauve with a picture hat of orchids, and looked very smart. Her *cher ami*, the man in glasses, followed in her wake.

"Here I am, dear," she said, "and I've brought Douglas Seton with me. Every little helps, doesn't it? Your rooms

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are large dear, and at first you'll find them difficult to fill."

"You are always thoughtful, Vi," said Frankie, and promptly turned her over to milady, who sternly controlled Vi's frivolity for the remainder of the afternoon.

People came thick and fast after this. Society men introduced by Lord Kinross, military men friends of Sir John, grave and reverend gentlemen invited by the Gavestons. All well-dressed, immaculate in frock coat, patent boots, and the latest thing in buttonholes, all pleased with themselves and not displeased with Frankie. The women dropped in by ones and twos, and seemed astonished to find how many men they knew! Lord Kinross and his sister arrived about half-past four.

Lady Paula was about seventeen, tall and fair with a bright sunny face and a bonny pair of dark blue eyes. I took a fancy to her at once, and she confided to me that she hoped we should be friends.

"My cousin Percival has told me all about you," she said frankly, "though he didn't say you were so pretty as you are. I shall tease him when he comes back."

"What about, Lady Paula?"

"What innocence! You must know he's awfully keen on you. I like your name—Cynthia. I shall call you so if you don't mind. That is, if you will remember that I am Paula. It saves trouble, and it is much more friendly."

We talked together for some time, the efforts of the pianist whom Frankie had engaged made a nice cover for our conversation. That, and the chink of the cups and saucers, drowned our voices, which was a good thing as we talked rather loud. By this time the rooms were crammed, I didn't know half the people and kept asking Lady Paula who they were. "A pretty woman your cousin," she observed. "Any amount of go. She'll be the rage this season, I expect. Half the smart set are here to-day and the other half will come to-morrow. It's quite a success, eh, Hartland?"

"Very much so," he returned, "Mrs. Norton is a charming hostess."

Paula nodded, and helped herself to cake.

"I don't see that funny little man you told me about, Hartland. What do you say he's called—'Fluffy'?"

"You must ask Miss Hamilton about him, Paula, he's a great friend of hers."

"Fluffy is very nice, not a bit like his name," I said laughing. "He'll be here later, with Sir John. They are both in the city at a board meeting."

"It's surprising to think of Fluffy and Strickland as co-directors or co-anything. The sleek-headed one used to set the poor old Colonel's nerves on edge," remarked Kinross.

"They are better friends, now," I answered coldly. "Mr. Thomson is a very sincere person."

Kinross grinned.

"And Sir John a very wise one," he remarked. "Sincerity and wisdom should do well together—in the City."

At this moment a tall, elegant girl, dressed in black, entered the room. I recognised her face, pale, distinguished-looking, with wonderful dark eyes.

"It is very sweet of you to come, Mary," said Frankie, "I am very pleased to see you."

Mary Vernon smiled and settled herself in a comfortable chair near the piano, and opposite Mrs. Curtis-Blount. That volatile lady took the advantage of a violin solo to comment upon things in general and Mary in particular. The solo coming to an untimely end, left her unaccompanied in the middle of a sentence. She, oblivious, continued:

"Of course she took them, isn't it proved by the fact that Kinross won't speak to her? Absolutely cuts her, his own cousin, in public."

"CONFESSIONS OF CYNTHIA."
New Series of Stories.

All ears were turned to Mrs. Curtis-Blount all eyes towards Mary and Lord Kinross. The latter with considerable address saved the situation.

"Come and see Mrs. Norton's china," he said smiling, "she's some awfully nice Chelsea in the other room."

Mary Vernon flushed, hesitated, and consented. They went together from the room. I wondered what would happen before the two returned.

Lord Kinross sauntered back some half hour later smiling and self confident as ever.

"Miss Vernon's gone home," he said presently. "She's more amiable than you," he added, "not half so hard hearted."

"She knows you better perhaps, and can make allowances for your—weakness."

"Possibly. You consider curiosity a weakness, Cynthia."

"Are you suffering from it?"

"Intensely. So are you. You want to know what Mary said to me, I desire to learn what Frankie is saying to Sir John. Shall we exchange confidences?"

I glanced up eagerly. I had not noticed Strickland's arrival and felt vexed that I had overlooked him. He was standing by the window, talking eagerly with Frankie. He was pale and seemed to stoop a little. It may have been the bright sunshine was trying, but he struck me as looking old and very worn. Frankie listened to him for a while, then moved towards the window into the shade of the curtains. She spoke quickly, impatiently, with an irritated little movement of her hand. She left him abruptly, and returned smiling to her guests. Sir John sighed and dropped wearily into a chair beside Lady Gaveston.

"Well," said Lord Kinross lightly, "and what do you think of it, Cynthia?"

I made no answer, I did not feel inclined to jest. I liked Sir John and was sorry for him.

"Has he received his *congé*, Cynthia?"

"What then?" I asked quickly, "how will it affect you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not at all. Your cousin a great deal. She's a beautiful woman, Cynthia, and I——" he paused.

"Well?"

"I admire beauty. So does Percival."

"He certainly contrives to keep your admiration within bounds."

"Perhaps. He'll be back soon, you know. And then," Lord Kinross bent towards me, "he'll admire *you* without any bounds at all."

I made no answer but endeavoured to look dignified.

"Now Paula, it's time we went. You've eaten all the cake, and Cynthia is quite cross. Coming to see you next week, is she? That's right, I want you two to be great friends."

Shortly after Lord Kinross and his sister left the rooms began to thin. By the time Fluffy arrived, they were all but empty. He flung himself into a chair and asked for tea; when the rest of the people had gone, he turned to Frankie.

"Pleasant afternoon?" he said.

"Splendid. It's been a complete success."

"I'm glad. I've had a very tiresome meeting in the City. We've had an unfavourable report from the Carnegie gold mine. The engineer has cabled that the ore is yielding less and less gold. The shares are going down like the deuce, and the shareholders are off their heads."

"How are the directors?"

Fluffy shrugged his shoulders. "We play the game," he said. "None of us stand to lose much except Sir John. He's very hard hit indeed. I told him not to venture more than £500 in the Carnegie, but he was enthusiastic and insisted on planking down ten thou.—his entire capital I'm thinking. He talked quite wildly this afternoon, declared he'd give up every farthing to save the company from ruin,

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and mouthed about his responsibility towards the shareholders. Just as if he'd anything to do with them. I tell you Frankie he's no more fit for a board of directors, than I am for the bench of bishops."

"And will the mine go wrong, do you think?"

"May do. We shall know better next week, The thing will settle itself one way or the other under a fortnight."

"And—" Frankie glanced towards Lady Gaveston, but her ladyship far from taking the hint sat firmly on her chair and knitted for dear life.

"Sir John won't get burnt unless he's a fool," said Fluffy. "If he does as he's told, we shall all come out on top, with thousands to the good. If not—" he grinned and passed his cup for tea.

"If Mr. Thomson has finished discussing business, there is something I should like to say to you, Frances," said Lady Gaveston coldly. "Don't go, Mr. Thomson, I wish you to remain. You are, I understand, an old friend of Mrs. Norton's husband, and as such I am sure you take a deep interest in her future. You also can remain, Cynthia, your cousin will not object."

Frankie glanced round quickly. She wanted, I could see, to defer the discussion, but there was a warlike air about Lady Gaveston, her spiky jet, her gleaming needles, that defied opposition. She was in no mood to brook defiance. My cousin therefore took a chair and waited for the fray.

"It is now some six weeks since I came to you, Frances, to act as your chaperone," commenced her ladyship. "You may remember that I reserved to myself the right of expressing disapproval of some, or any of your actions should the occasion arise. I now feel called upon to do so, and in the strongest terms. In fact, if you do not see your way to alter your conduct in this matter, I shall leave you and return to Scotland."

Frankie breathed hard. It was an unexpected blow and came at a critical moment. On the eve of social success—it would be fatal to be left without a chaperone.

"In what way do you find fault with me, Lady Gaveston?"

"In many ways, Frances. I shall however only specify one. I have a great regard for Sir John Strickland, and I strongly reprobate your treatment of him. Are you, or are you not, his future wife?"

"That," said Frankie, "I am not at liberty to say."

Lady Gaveston glowered. "It's a dishonest answer," she said, "and one that should shame you. You can play with laddies like Kinross to your heart's content. I despise such goings on, but they don't trouble me. But when I see a man like John Strickland suffering from the bad treatment you are giving him, I am moved to speak. Not a word has he said, I have seen and heard for myself. I'll see and hear no more of that sort. Yes, or no, are you going to marry him? If it's 'no,' give him his answer, he'll take it. If it's 'yes,' down on your knees, and thank the Lord that he has sent you such a man to love and tend. Which is it to be, Frances?"

"Are you going to leave me, if I say no, Lady Gaveston?"

"I don't believe in compulsion, Francis. I wouldn't force any woman against her will. One way or the other, it doesn't matter which to me, but one way or the other it must be settled. Sir John shall not be made a fool of any longer, if I'm to stay in the house."

"Sir John is poor," said Frankie, "Mr. Thomson says within a fortnight he may be even poorer; or he may be very rich. I'll be candid with you, Lady Gaveston; if John Strickland were wealthy I'd be his wife rather than any other man's, but I cannot, will not, be the wife of a beggar. As things are now it would jeopardise my future and his to promise marriage. In a fortnight the issue will be clear. The Carnegie will prove a gold mine or the reverse. Strickland will make or lose his fortune. In a fortnight I will either promise Sir John to be his wife, or——" she paused, "I will not see him any more. Will you wait?"

Lady Gaveston stared hard at her. "It's borne in upon me," she said, "that you ought to decide here and now. But there's that about you which makes it difficult for me to refuse. I'll wait a fortnight, Frances, but not a moment more." She gathered up her knitting and departed grimly from the room.

Fluffy, much relieved, lit a cigarette, and read the paper. Frankie sat gazing at the floor deep in thought. As for me I was tired and rather sad.

What a lot of things were going to happen in a fortnight! Percival Hope was coming back to town, Kinross would, I suppose, decide as to his future course with Frankie, the Carnegie mine would prove a failure or a triumph, Sir John — somehow I could not bear to think about Sir John. My mind went back to the time he had come up with us to town from Lady Winchin's. I pictured him as he stood bare headed on the pavement, straining to catch the last glimpse of Frankie's face.

How would it all end? Would Frankie dismiss Strickland and marry Kinross, or would she flout his lordship and be true to Sir John? It might be—the thought was strange—that having played with the one, and amused herself with the other, both at the same time, she would at the last moment lose the two together.

Well I should know, and so would she—in a fortnight.

(Next Tuesday's SHORT STORIES contains another striking instalment of "Cynthia's Confessions.")

AN Irish servant girl being sent for a bottle of capers, asked the astounded shopman for a "bottle of them 'jumps'!"

"YOU should never take anything that doesn't agree with you," the physician told him. "If I'd always followed that rule, Maria," he remarked to his wife, "where would you be?"

"YOU shouldn't find fault with my temper," said she. "When we were married, you know, you took me for better or for worse." "I know it," was the reply, "but I had a hope of striking something like a general average."

"PA, what sort of a house is that?" "That, my son, is the blind asylum. Blind people live in there." "They can't see, can they?" "No, my boy." "Then what has the house got windows for, if they can't see?"

MUTUAL FRIEND: "It really is shocking, dear, the way in which you and your husband quarrel and carry on. I wonder you don't separate from him." Injured Wife: "What, go away, and leave him alone to do just as he likes? Not me."

"How can I leave thee, oh, my love?" warbled Adolphus, under the window of Eliza, one shimmering moonlight night, when up spoke the policeman on that beat, and harshly said: "Come now, young man, just move on. The family what lived here moved two weeks ago."

A LITTLE boy was taking a walk one day with his father when they came upon a hen proudly marching out a brood of ducklings. Looking at them with great seriousness, the little fellow remarked: "Father, I wonder what a hen thinks when it finds it has laid duck's eggs?"

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Murder by Speaking Tube.

A Powerful Story in Two Parts. Conclusion.

The First Part of the Story in Brief.

DR. FEATHERSTONE, a country surgeon with a dwindling practice and an extravagant wife, is in a serious financial position. His only hope is centred in an old Peake, who is living with him as paying guest. She is extremely wealthy, has no heir, her only son having been killed in South Africa, and is very fond of her host, the "dear doctor." Her infatuation goes to such a length that she leaves the whole of her fortune—something over forty thousand pounds—to the doctor in her will, and informs him of the fact through her lawyers. He refuses to take the money for form's sake, but is over-ruled. Then suddenly the son, who was reported dead, is seen by Mrs. Featherstone, and the doctor realises that unless Mrs. Peake dies before she has time to alter the will, the fortune will never be his.

It so happens that Mrs. Peake has been boasting to a friend that she is accustomed to help the doctor in his dispensing, and, anxious to support her boast by demonstration when next her visitor calls, she intreats the doctor to allow her to make up an harmless dose all by herself. He refuses, but while thinking the matter over an awful temptation assails him. Here is the chance of securing to himself the fortune by means of a terrible deed.

IN DISPENSARY AND SURGERY.

DOCTOR FEATHERSTONE watched the little snowy puffs of thin hair bobbing up and down with the old lady's sobs. "I sympathise with you, my dear Mrs. Peake," he said, "in not wishing that spiteful cat—pardon the name, I never liked the woman!—to be able to laugh at you."

"I could not—could not live under ridicule," wept she.

"But if my hand in this harmless little deception were suspected—it is a very little thing, but it would mean ruin to me. You might be in a playful mood one day and let out the joke, without thinking how it would hurt me——"

"You can swear me to secrecy!" said the old lady eagerly. "I can see it is more serious than I thought, dear Freddie, for you are so pale and frightened about it. I wish I had not been so foolish. But forgive me, and do but help me in this, and I will never boast again."

"Here is Mrs. Featherstone," he said suddenly. "She must never know. I will think it over. I should dearly like to oblige you. Minnie, take dear Mrs. Peake and be cross with her for a minute. She has been allowing herself to be silly enough to cry. She has been studying those big books a little too hard."

Alone once more he took the chances in his hands and studied them.

"I believe," he thought, "it is intended that I should take the opportunity and use it. My career—my home, my wife, my two little ones at school—all this in the balance against a little remnant of this old, worn out creature's life and, and the means of being idle to the son of her old age, a young man without cares and the whole world before him. What does he want with money? Against this—all that it means to me! There's a higher justice——"

Meaning that the mad instinct of self-preservation cried out within him and would not be denied.

A whole scheme crystallised before his mind's eye while the old woman had gazed up in his face. It was sharp, symmetrical, without a flaw. Many a man might have been hanged on circumstantial evidence—this was a plan to prepare circumstantial evidence to clear him.

Censure there would be. He must bear that. Suspicion there might be, but it would be idle. The verdict would certainly be "death by misadventure."

He brooded long over his solitary pipe.

"Minnie must be kept in the dark all through, and I must assure her of my entire innocence even if she suspects. I cannot have her turn from me, for a million pounds, no!"

"I shall be censured for allowing the old woman at any time to monkey about in the dispensary, but I can explain that I never permitted her to do more than hand a bottle down for me after I had indicated the exact one. The boasting of the old woman to Miss Fryar I can easily prove to be lies, prompted by silly vanity. Why, everybody knows it—the coachman, Martha, Ellen, my wife, Richards!" (He named his brother practitioner who took his connection and stayed at the house while he was away). "Richards has often laughed at the joke. I'm safe in that particular.

"Miss Fryar shall see her make up her own dose, that is the main thing, and she can swear to the foolish victim's crazy claim to a knowledge of drugs. How simple it all is!

"The will is sure to turn suspicion on me. It looks nasty. If young Peake turns up, he may contest it, too, and I may have to ease my strained nerves a bit by turning generous and coming to a compromise. Any sacrifice even to one-half the legacy to end the worry. I may not go so far, but we can leave that. I am secure on the point of the will. The lawyers and others—and the old lady's diary, too, can testify to it that I opposed the idea; that I urged the looking-up of next-of-kin and the claims of hospitals and that I urged Mrs. Peake to reside elsewhere. Hylton begged me at last, for her health's sake, to let her stay. My disinterestedness has been cracked up all round. I knew her so well, too; the more I urged her to take back her money the more determined she was to let the will stand."

He was not without a twinge of shame as he ran over the list of his acts of duplicity, and he actually admired himself for his feelings of self-disgust and squirmed beforehand with the pain of undergoing the suspicion that was inevitable.

"But after all," he said, wiping a wreath of cold sweat from his brow, "I shall have the money. There can be no serious hitch. Nasty remarks, that's all!"

Mrs. Peake found the dear doctor won over to the idea, and prepared now to enter into the spirit of the "joke."

"This is my idea," he said, "I shall be in the surgery, and will whisper instructions to you through the speaking-tube. The end in the dispensary can be hidden by bottles and things, and you can easily stand near the open mouthpiece.

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The least inclination of your head will bring your ear near it. You have a dear little way of your own of putting your head on one side when you are thinking. 'Let me see,' you will say, 'what else will improve the mixture?' That will be my signal, or, in fact, any sound you like to make near the mouthpiece, and I will tell you a few harmless things to swell the prescription a little. In between you can say what you like about some of the poisons which are on a shelf all to themselves."

Mrs. Peake pressed his hand in gratitude.

"Go down now," he said hurriedly, "and we will rehearse it. That woman shall not have a laugh at your expense if I can prevent it."

Mrs. Peake set her mouth firmly.

"Trust me," she said. "I will go down now."

"And, by the way, to test your knowledge of the measuring glass you shall bring me the dose complete and I will see if you under or overdo it."

He laughed as he spoke. The measures were to be uniform and finally filled up to a given figure, and there was no room for error.

The rehearsal was a great success. Mrs. Peake was exact to a drop. As the understood total was to be exactly one fluid ounce the careful old lady corrected all mistakes with the last item, *i.e.*, pure water, making it reach the large figure "1" without troubling about the others to a drop or two.

The doctor emptied the dose away laughingly, and the rehearsal was renewed several times until it seemed desirable to stop the repeated journeys backward and forward lest they should attract attention. It could be carried through easily enough now, and would take up so little time that Featherstone had not a fear as to the result, though half-a-dozen patients were shown in while he should be occupied with his whispering.

* * * * *

Mary Havers, wearing colours for the first time since her lover's supposed death, had gone to the side entrance of Featherstone's house, where she caught sight of Matilda, Mrs. Peake's one faithful retainer.

"Close the door, Matilda," she said, in a whisper, "I don't want any one inside to know just yet."

Matilda, without a sign of astonishment at Miss Havers' odd behaviour, did as she was bid, and the two were now entirely concealed from view by the irregular growth of shrubs growing right up to the wall and edging the winding path. Mary beckoned someone forward from the concealment of a turn in the path, and a moment afterwards Matilda was face to face with one before whom she might excusably have screamed "A ghost!"

"Do you know who this is? Don't make a noise."

The young woman did not cry out or indeed make any fuss at all, though tears of joy started into her widely rounded eyes.

"Oh, it's Master George! I should say Mr. Peake, I s'pose, now he've got a moustache," she said. "Then you're not dead? Well, I'm proud to say I never could nor would believe but what you'd turn up again. Well, there, I would like to kiss him a welcome home, I would. Do you mind, miss?"

"Oh, Matilda, you'll be the death of me yet!" gasped Mary, pushing George forward.

The smiling young man gave her a hearty smack, and received one in return, when, in a level tone of voice, as if a return from the grave was a daily event she said, eyeing him up and down—

"And in khaki, too! Aren't you glad the war's over, sir?"

"Tilly," said the young man, without waiting to reply, "I have a long story to tell you some other time. I was wounded badly and lost my memory for a long time, I certainly was not killed, anyhow. I haven't long come out of Netley hospital with my noddle in working order again, and I find there's been a blunder in naming me. I knew how you'd take the news, but how do you think your mistress will? We were afraid of giving her a shock while she was so ill and weak, and Miss Havers has been coming every day since Sunday to make sure that she was well enough to bear it. Miss Havers suggests going in first now and preparing her with some roundabout talk. What do you think about it?"

"I know what you mean," said the woman, "but my opinion is it's all nonsense about good news being dangerous to anybody. It may upset 'em like, but it makes 'em clear and happy, all the same, like a fresh breeze a-blowin' through a house——"

"And knocking the pictures down, eh, Tilly? Well, you truly think your mistress would be none the worse?"

"Not a ha'porth, sir. It would be just as well, though, not to give the poor dear too much of a startlerizer. Suppose I let you in by this door to save you showing yourselves at the front. I'll tell Ellen and Martha and shut their screechin' mouths up before I let you in; then I'll take you through to the surgery. There's nobody there. Your mother's got a lady friend with her, and the doctor he's in the droring-room, I think. You can tell him yourselves if he comes in accidental. Then you can speak to the mistress first, Miss Havers, and Master George he can come from behind the curtains when you think she's prepared, or you can take Mrs. Peake to another room and say you'll bring the master to her

This arrangement commended itself at once, and presently the three conspirators were safely slipped into the surgery without being seen except by the other two gasping servants, who were athrill with the romance involved in the plan.

A small curtained alcove containing a chair for occasional dentistry suggested a good hiding place, and here George and Mary secreted themselves. Though their taking seats in quite an ordinary manner suggested nothing at all mysterious.

A swish of silk was heard before Matilda could leave them, and the woman whispered: "That's the mistress!" and stepped out of the alcove.

A moment later she returned with her finger on her lips.

"She've gone into the dispensary, and Ellen's been told to bring tea there for her and Miss Fryar.

"Could I have a peep at her?" said George, yearning to see the dear white-haired, apple-cheeked old lady moving about in all unconsciousness of what was in store for her.

"Easy." And conveyed by his mother's stolid maid, George made soft-footed for the hall, leaving Mary in the recess. A look to see that all was clear, and Matilda had placed him in a dark corner where he could watch the two antiquated heads bobbing in friendly converse between him and the glowing garden.

Hardly a second seemed to have passed before a hurried step sounded in the surgery, and Mary looked out, prepared to speak to whomsoever it might be.

It was Dr. Featherstone, and he had passed from view before she could speak and without seeing her.

He was only on the other side of the curtain within two yards of her, but Mary did not make a sound.

There was something in the pale face of Featherstone that seemed to have chilled her blood. Fear, horror? She knew not what it was; but such a look as that she had never seen on mortal face before, and for a moment or two she held her breath and trembled. The feeling was gone very soon, for this beautiful athletic specimen of per-

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fect womanhood was the wrong one to suffer any great time under an attack of "nerves." Her not having declared her presence at once was a trifle awkward. She would step out and apologise for absent-mindedness.

As she moved over the thick carpet there came a faint "Ting!" of a bell and an answering gasp from the doctor.

Mary was clear of the alcove, but the doctor did not see her. His back was towards her, and he was whispering into a speaking-tube, unslung from a corner of the many angled room.

She waited irresolute and heard certain slow careful instructions being given to someone at the other end of the pipe. And then there was nothing to do but wait. His preoccupation would appear to have covered her entrance.

It was nothing—only directions to somebody to put together certain ingredients of a mixture.

Mary had some knowledge of drugs. The uncle who had left her and her orphan sister the little property they now enjoyed, had been a doctor, and she had often helped him with his medicines. For the matter of that she had lent her assistance to Featherstone, and it was doubtless envy of her accomplishment in this direction which had started poor Mrs. Peake in her course of absurd imitation. She now followed the instructions in a listless half-interested way.

It was a harmless sort of dose for somebody, and the instructions were certainly to a novice; for, after mention of the name, the drug was further specified by location. "Second on the third row from the left—*from* the left, not *to* the left—a *green* bottle with a gilt glass stopper"—and so on. There were long pauses between the items, and Doctor Featherstone's tongue often grew dry in a parched mouth—the sound of his voice suggested that. And as his mouth grew parched his brow grew moist, for he repeatedly wiped his damp forehead, and a dull red burnt visibly behind his ears.

Mary's listlessness became strained interest. She was watching him, she could not imagine why, and leaning forward quite close. Had he turned round she would have bluntly asked for an explanation, though a severe snub should be her portion for her pains.

Amazing! The man was now prompting as for a lecture.—mentioning poisons and their properties in between his instructions, and speaking with great slowness and repetition of pronunciation. "That is enough," he said at last. "One more ingredient; then fill to the one ounce with water."

He now, with tense deliberation, specified that one ingredient, giving its abbreviated name and indicating its position on one of the shelves.

Mary was wondering—wondering—when the man whispered sharply:

"Now, you never shrink at the most nauseous draught remember—take it at a gulp!"

A cry of fright burst from him the instant after, for the mouthpiece was snatched from his hand and a strong grasp on his coat-collar swung him aside at the same time.

"Stop!" cried a clear, ringing voice. "Do not drink that—it's poison!"

Three times the word was reiterated—"Poison! Poison! Poison!" while shrieks and shouts came from the region of the dispensary—then Mary was struck to the ground with a chair, swung round first in a sweep that smashed vases, pictures, and the globes of a gasolier.

George had been watching with great amusement, through tears standing in his eyes, the whole antic performance of his dear little mother.

"Dear soul!" he had murmured. "Isn't she showing off! She knows a bit about dispensing evidently, fearing a trade in her old age! What a lot of toxicological erudition to be sure! She could be a Lucrezia Borgia if she wasn't such an old angel. Oh, you conceited little girl!"

Mrs. Peake had turned and raised the dose high like a glass of wine.

"Confusion to the headache!" she said affectedly.

Then came that terrible cry from the speaking-tube.

George, who heard it, shouted and ran forward; and his mother, who could not lose her pride in her feat of dispensing even in the shock of seeing her son, carefully laid down the dose before she screamed.

"It is my son!" she cried, and clasped him tightly round the neck; then screamed again and again.

It was all screaming. The maids outside, hearing the screams and shouts in the dispensary and sounds of cries and smashes in the surgery, added to the uproar all it was in the power of their own lungs to do; but rushed with one accord to the help of Miss Havers.

None was needed. Mary, after receiving the first coward blow, had turned on Featherstone, seized and flung him—a feat not difficult to a girl of her strength, in dealing with a man so slight and weak—and was found kneeling on the man, who was now almost raging mad.

* * * * *

The examination of Dr. Featherstone before the magistrate had an unexpected result. The draught that seemed so miraculously prevented from going down Mrs. Peake's throat, proved on analysis to contain no poisonous ingredient!

Mary Havers was clear in her testimony; Mrs. Peake had the name of the deadly drug off by heart, and was sure she had added it just before the water, following the instructions of the "dear doctor," as she still quaintly called the scoundrel; and in his first frenzy of terror Featherstone had made admissions which pointed conclusively to his murderous intent, and justified Mary's accusation to the full. Yet the fact remained that the draught as compounded was not poisonous. There could only be one explanation, poor Mrs. Peake had added one more blunder to the list, and taken down the wrong bottle at the critical moment.

In the circumstances the accused man was admitted to bail, and cut the knot of the difficulty by himself swallowing the poison which Mrs. Peake had failed to take.

One person was glad, or at least relieved in mind, at this tragic end—Featherstone's wife. She wept sore and oft, for she loved the man; but when she remembered the terrible moment when their two souls had stood nakedly before each other in their eyes, and when hers had been the lips to first give form of words to their mutual horrid thought of murder, she knew that had he lived there would have been a cold ghost between them evermore. The ghost of a murder which had failed.

Her share in the ugly thing was not suspected, but she did not go without punishment. It was Mrs. Peake's generous hand which, by deed of gift, placed herself and family beyond danger of want, and it never failed to give a bitter flavour to her bread to know that it was undeserved when eaten.

The End.

Daughter: "I love him. He is the light of my life." Father: "Well, that's all right, but I object to having my house lit up by him after midnight."

Ada: "You are a flat, Freddie—nothing more!" Freddie: "What else could you expect? You sit on me at every possible opportunity."

She: "Postpone our wedding till October? Impossible. If I don't marry you in August I can't marry you at all." He: "Why not?" She: "Oh—er—Mr. Simmons asked me to marry him in September and I promised to."

Father: "Sarah, I don't like that fellow that comes here to see you." Sarah: "I don't see why not, pa. I'm sure he bears the impress of a gentleman." Father (wriggling his foot): "If he comes again he'll bear the impress of another gentleman."

Teacher: "If you face the north, directly behind you will be south, on your right hand will be east, and on your left west." Seeing a lack of attention on the part of Bobby and wishing to catch him: "What is on your left hand, Bobby?" Bobby (in deep confusion): "Please, ma-a-m—it's some tar, an' it winna come off."

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An Innocent Pretence.

Telling of a Sham Engagement which Ended in Reality.

Susan Miller was decidedly perplexed and a trifle worried by the behaviour of the young artist, whose name she had discovered to be Ralph Overend. For nearly a week he had been keeping a watch on her movements; she had arrived at this conclusion from the fact that she met him whenever she went out. It would have been bad enough to meet him at every turn, even although he did not attempt to speak to her, but he had endeavoured to make a rapid sketch of her on several occasions with his pencil and note-book.

It is highly probable that, if the man had been a loafer or some impudent "gentleman" who fancied that he might permit his eyes to take liberties which his mouth dared not utter, Susan Miller would have boldly requested him to discontinue his silent persecution, or, at least, would have taken steps to put an end to it. This man, however, was neither of those; she was abashed as well as vexed by his conduct, and felt afraid to do or say anything. She was satisfied that he did not mean to be offensive, that he was perfectly honourable; yet it was extremely provoking.

The thought occurred to her that he might be in love with her, but she laughed at the idea. Had it been so, he would have sought an interview through the good offices of some artist known to both; that would not have been a difficult task. "And then," mused Susan with a quiet smile, "the affair would have come to an abrupt termination, for I am not at all in love with him and he would soon find it out!"

Nevertheless, that state of things could not go on indefinitely, and she would have to put an end to it in some way or other. But how?

"Susan, dear," said her mother tenderly, during the evening of one of the days when Ralph Overend had attempted to sketch her: "I wish you were—married and settled!"

"Don't talk like that, mamma!" said Susan reproachfully. "You don't wish me to leave you, do you?"

"No, Susie," was the reply, "but I have often wondered what would happen if—if you were left. Perhaps I ought to have removed from this neighbourhood; I fancy you are not so much in love with art as your poor father. I stayed here, among artists, to gratify my own feelings and to retain the memory of the old days. I thought you might fall in love with an artist."

"I am fond of art, I believe, mamma, but I have no inclination to marry anyone, artist or otherwise. So let us forget the subject."

Mrs. Miller said nothing aloud, but to herself she said: "I thought there might be something in it. I know he has followed her two or three times, and he comes of a good family, so I understand. Can I? Well, no; it is not fair to force them together. Well, well!"

On the very next morning, as Susan Miller was returning from a shopping expedition, she found the artist walking by her side as she turned into the street in which she lived. He must have been waiting at the corner for her. She felt indignant, gave him a haughty stare, and hurried towards her own door. She heard his hurrying steps behind her and thought that she heard his voice as he began to say something, but her anger prevented her from understanding. She quickened her pace and reached the house.

The door was open and she hastened up the steps and into the hall. She was conscious that he was following her, and was about to call for her mother when that lady appeared. Her daughter's breathless condition and flushed cheeks suggested that she had been subjected to unwelcome attentions, and she turned with a severe countenance to the young man who had intruded.

"May I ask what you are doing here, sir, and why you are annoying my daughter?" she demanded sternly.

Ralph Overend was more confused than Susan herself; he appeared to recognise that he had placed himself in an awkward and ridiculous position. His eyes wandered from the severe face of Mrs. Miller to the pretty, flushed countenance of her daughter.

"I wish to know the meaning of this, sir!" demanded Mrs. Miller more sternly, as the young man did not answer her first inquiry.

"'Pon my honour, madam, I'm very sorry!" he began confusedly. "I admit that it is an abrupt way to ask anything so delicate, but I—well, I wish to propose to your daughter—I mean——"

His confusion redoubled; he appeared to have made a muddle of what he intended to say, but before he could set matters right Mrs. Miller interrupted with just the ghost of a smile.

"Well, it *is* rather an abrupt way of putting it, but I suppose that it is not always arranged in one set fashion. But I think that it is not quite decorous to discuss such questions in the hall! Come this way!"

She liked the artist; his frankness and his boldness pleased her. If a man wanted a woman, why should he hesitate to take the shortest cut to an introduction and victory? The poor fellow was deeply in love, of course, and had been unable to procure an invitation. And Susan? Mrs. Miller flattered herself that all would go as she wished if she took matters in hand. Her daughter would follow her lead.

Mrs. Miller led the way, while Susan looked after her in amazement. Ralph allowed Mrs. Miller to walk a few steps in advance, so as to be out of ear-shot, and then whispered to the astonished girl:

"I'm awfully sorry, I am, really! I was confused and out of breath, and I muddled it. I—I really didn't ask for your hand! I can see you don't want me, and *I* am wedded to my art! I want a few sittings for a picture that I have longed to paint for three years, but I could not find the exact model. I shall call it 'An English Maiden.' *You* are the exact counterpart of my dreams, and I have tried to sketch you at the risk of being rude, but in vain. So I determined to ask you to give me a sitting or two. Your father was an artist, and there is a kind of freemasonry among artists. I thought at last that I might venture——"

"We must go in! Mother has gone!" exclaimed Susan. "I really don't know what to say. Oh, dear! She thinks—and I don't believe she will consent if she knows that she is mistaken. And I don't care about giving the sittings, either!"

Mrs. Miller was waiting in the room with a complacent smile; it would all work out well, although the manner of it was a *little* unconventional! They were having a few words quietly in the hall!

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Susan walked slowly towards the room, but not before she had noted the look of intense disappointment on Ralph's visage. After all, there was nothing wrong in giving him a sitting or two. "An English Maiden." Yes, an English maiden likes a little fun, and it would certainly be amusing to go through this piece of acting. More than anything else, it would cure her mother of match-making, for Mrs. Miller would have time to realise how the marriage of her daughter would affect her! The thought of losing her daughter would be a trial to Mrs. Miller as it is to any mother.

"I'll do it," she whispered to Overend, on the spur of the moment. "But mind, say as little as possible to my mother, so that we do not give ourselves away!"

"Good!" returned Ralph. His heart smote him on account of his duplicity, but he smothered his conscience with the assurance that it was nothing.

"I am afraid that I have been somewhat too forward, Mrs. Miller," he said frankly, as he entered the room. "May I ask you to allow me to arrange the matter with your daughter? Miss Miller has consented to give me sittings for a picture."

"Oh, yes, mamma!" cried Susan vivaciously, partly in an effort to hide her real feelings, which were mingled with a little shame at the thought of hoaxing her mother. "I thought that we could have father's old easel down here, and Mr. Overend could come and I would sit for him, and——"

"Yes, I understand," interrupted Mrs. Miller significantly. "Certainly, you can have your dear father's easel. And what is the picture to be and where do you intend to try and exhibit it, Mr. Overend?"

He explained the title, and added that he intended it for the Paris *Salon*. "They will forget to laugh at our girls when they see that picture, I think," he cried enthusiastically.

So it was settled, and the sittings began. Both Susan and Ralph quite understood the position, while Mrs. Miller thought that she understood it, which was almost the same thing, only different, as the children say. Mrs. Miller played propriety for the first few sittings, and watched with pride the growth of the picture, which was really her daughter's portrait. Susan was dressed very simply, with a plain gown and a rose in her hair, and Mrs. Miller was obliged to confess that the plainness of the costume set off to perfection the grace of her daughter's figure and the charm of her face. It was a picture; that word, so often misused, was the only one that described the girl as she sat patiently as a model for her artist acquaintance.

But the painting of Susan's counterfeit presentment was a longer process than Mrs. Miller imagined it would be, so she decided that she might leave the young people to themselves. Mr. Overend was determined to make the picture a success, and became thoroughly engrossed in his work. That was what puzzled Mrs. Miller; she was pleased that he should prove so devoted to his art, yet she would have preferred to see him somewhat less attentive on this occasion and more devoted to his model. However, that would come when they were alone!

When she left them to themselves, however, the position did not change in the least; they chatted on a variety of subjects, just as mere acquaintances, but there was nothing that bore even the most remote resemblance to a love passage. Susan Miller began to repent having gone so far into this deception, but afterwards she took a real interest in the painting, and was anxious that it should turn out well.

One day the everyday topics of conversation failed, and the subject turned on marriage without either of them being conscious of the manner in which the turn had been given to it.

"I really think that artists ought not to get married," said Ralph decidedly. "It seems to me that a man cannot devote himself to his art if he has a wife who requires his attention! And a wife usually requires too much of his attention to permit him to give proper time to his vocation in life."

"Men are tyrants, and that is what *you* mean to say of women, Mr. Overend," observed Susan, with a laugh. "As soon as a man is married, he imagines that he has a slave to order about. I have always displeased my mother by my inclination to remain free, as I call it. I prefer liberty to slavery. One of our modern writers has said that marriage is the hardest profession that a woman can enter, and I agree with her."

"I should never give up my art for a woman!" he said, with an air of determination. "Oh, yes, I know that others have made that assertion and have conveniently forgotten it when it suited them to do so! But I fail to see what inducement there is for a man to marry when he has a profession such as mine. If he be merely engaged, now, in a commercial calling, why, he wants some other attraction, but an artist! You, however, will alter your opinions on the subject before many years have passed. You will think of yourself as an older woman, when Nature has followed its usual course with those you hold dear, and you are left alone."

"Oh, I shall not be alone!" cried Susan lightly. "Of course I shall have my occupations, and I shall have pets, and——"

"I beg pardon!" interrupted Ralph, with assumed gravity. "I forgot the cat!"

Then they both laughed merrily. Mrs. Miller would have been much disturbed in her ideas regarding the progress of the courtship had she been present then; there was nothing more free from the cares of love-making than that laugh.

Another week passed, during which the picture assumed a more and more completed appearance until completion was actually reached. The sittings were over; and Mrs. Miller would soon have to be told that they had come to nothing from a matrimonial point of view.

"It was rather too bad!" murmured Susan, "and I would not have kept up the farce so long if I hadn't promised to sit till the picture was completed. I couldn't go back on my word! That wouldn't be like an 'English Maiden.' By the way, I think he ought to call it 'A British Maiden.' But I suppose he cannot, since the type varies in each country."

Mrs. Miller was loud in her praises of the painting.

"It isn't quite a portrait. I admit that you have improved somewhat on the original," she remarked impartially. "It ought to gain a prize!"

"I demur to the statement that I have made any improvement," said Overend. "If it is only a faithful reproduction, then it must gain a prize!"

"You must say good-bye to the painting, Miss Miller," said Overend on the following day. "I must take it away to-day in order to have it packed in my studio, under my own care, for transmission to Paris."

Susan Miller turned with a light heart to the picture and took a last long gaze at it. Somehow, it seemed different. What was it that sent a throb through her frame and caused that strange look to appear in her lovely eyes. She dropped the cloth over it and turned away.

"I hope you will be rewarded for your preseverance and talent, Mr. Overend. Pack it securely, please! It would be too dreadful if it were to be injured in transit!"

"Dreadful!" exclaimed Overend alarmed. "I'll see that every care is taken, Miss Miller."

Any one who had heard him tell Susan that he had left the painting in her possession till the last minute would have been surprised to see him sitting in front of it and making no preparation for packing. He was gazing at it, yet away from it. His eyes were upon the picture, but his thoughts were round the corner. The sittings were over and the pleasant hours spent with Susie Miller were gone, never to

return. Never! He shuddered at the word. He realised now that he had grown to love her; all his talk about art being sufficient was vain. He was no different from others, and he owned it manfully, at the same time calling himself an idiot for having said so. Art is not sufficient; a woman does not spoil a man's career, his chance of developing the talent within him; she helps him if she is a true woman. She brings out all the good that is in him and ennobles his ideas. How could he get off without a true wife? It seemed an impossibility now!

"But there is no hope of winning her!" he groaned. "A woman is more impressionable than a man, and she would have shown her feelings in some slight way if she had been in love with me, or even if she had merely thought she might like me. I don't believe she could have helped showing it, somehow! And I really think that a woman sticks to her opinions faster than a man!"

For another half-hour he stared at the picture.

"I can't part with that!" he decided. "So that settles it. I am not going to run the risk of having that damaged in transit if I can't have the original. I simply can't part with it, putting aside the question of damage. What am I to do when I sit down to work if I haven't that picture to look at now and then to encourage me? It isn't going to the *Salon*, no matter what I lose by it!"

He rammed some tobacco fiercely into the bowl of his pipe, but stopped in the act of lighting it.

"What on earth am I to tell her when she asks about it? That's awkward. Shall I see her again, to speak to? H'm, perhaps not, after her mother finds out that it was a put-up job. So I shall not speak to her again, eh?"

He laid down his pipe and thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket. He strode up and down the room in deep thought for several minutes.

"I can't stand it! I'll see about it at once!" he cried aloud, and he clapped his hat on his head and went round the corner.

"Has the picture gone, Mr. Overend?" asked Susan.

"No, it hasn't."

"But you will be too late!" exclaimed Susan in dismay. "You have hardly time to get it off. What have you been doing?"

"Thinking!" returned Overend lucidly. "And I've decided that I won't let that picture go out of my studio unless I can have the original in its place! There!"

"But you can't put me on an easel, you know!" said Susan, with an attempt at playfulness which was spoilt by the quiver in her voice and the extreme pallor that overspread her face.

"I want you for my wife! I love you, Susie, I love you! Will you come to me?"

"You said that you were wedded to your art!" protested Susan, her cheeks glowing like burning coals now, and her eyes sparkling with a strange light.

"And you spoke of men being tyrants!" he retorted. "Come, own up, just as I do. I was wrong—and you?"

"I think I'll chance the tyranny!" she replied, with a laugh that was nearly a cry. Her heart was full of happiness. Like him, she had learnt the true state of her feelings when she realised that the sittings were over.

Mrs. Miller smiled meaningly when she was informed of the engagement.

"It began rather unconventionally," she remarked, in blissful ignorance of the real facts, "and you have been rather longer than I anticipated in arriving at a result, but all's well that ends well, and I am very glad."

"So are we!" exclaimed Ralph joyously, while Susie blushed.

G. E. Lingen.

TO THOSE WHO WRITE.

A Prize of One Guinea will be paid every week by the Editor for the best short story sent in by any of his readers. Contributions should not be less than 1,500 words in length, and not more than 3,000. The Editor reserves to himself the right to publish any contribution submitted. Stamped addressed envelopes must be enclosed for the return of the stories, but, while every care will be taken, the Editor cannot hold himself responsible for possible loss of MSS.

This week readers will notice that I have introduced a new feature into Short Stories. It is one which I feel sure will commend itself to everybody, and will prove useful as well as interesting. The column is conducted by an expert, whose services have been secured at great expense. This expense, however, will have been well laid out if every reader of Short Stories will call the attention of his or her friends to the information contained under the date of their birthday.

Surely, for example, you know some friend whose birthday occurs between July 22nd and July 28th? If so, just send them this copy of Short Stories and mark the information contained under the date. This column will appear every week in future.

On page 117 you will notice that I have renewed the great "Pass-It-Along" offer. It is early yet, of course, to tell how the scheme has been taken up by my readers, but I trust that all who entered the first competition will enter the lists again this week, for there is not the slightest reason why you should not win one of the handsome prizes twice running, and indeed, as many times as this unique offer is renewed. Your friends, too, by now probably will have entered into the spirit of the scheme, and will be only too willing to help you again, this time with more speed, so that both you and they stand a better chance of success.

And now I have another big surprise for you. At great expense and not a little trouble I have secured for subsequent covers of Short Stories several artistic designs, embodying the tartan plaids of the principal clans of Scotland.

These will be reproduced in their correct colours, and besides forming an excellent cover for the current issue of your little paper, will be well worth keeping. A correspondent who told me some few weeks back that she was preserving her covers and pasting them on to a large screen for decorative purposes, will find these tartan covers a distinctly advantageous addition to her collection. I hope to be able to use the first of these covers with next Tuesday's issue. As I am having a handsome poster of this design circulated all over the country, and as the "Pass-It-Along" scheme will be bringing in many new subscribers, it will be well for my regular readers to order their copies a few days beforehand.

For This Week's Competition I want you to construct a sentence containing only words of three letters. The reader who sends me in the longest and most sensible sentence under these conditions will be presented with a handsome and massive silver pencil-case. Ten consolation prizes of rolled gold hearts and rolled gold charms will be given to those readers whose efforts come next. As before, postcards only should be used, and they should be marked "Three Letters," and addressed to the Competition Editor, Short Stories, Henrietta Street, Strand, W.C. Competition closes on July 29th.

Below I give the result of the "Word" competition. The first prize of a solid silver pencil-case goes to P. C. Leggett, 69 North Street, Sudbury, while the ten consolation prizes go to the following competitors:—A. G. Seaward, 22 Daniels Road, Nunhead; T. Allison, 18 Fleet Street, Gorton, Manchester; E. Bulleid, 60 Sherrard Road, Forest Gate; Violet Robinson, 60 Sherrard Road, Forest Gate; Mrs. Faid, Town Hall, Sunderland; A. G. Boll, 18 Double Row, Bate's Cottages, Seaton Delaval; W. Shackleton, Victoria Road, Cowling, Yorks; H. S. Parsley, 20 Grosvenor Road, Canton, Cardiff; Annie L. Nicoll, 39 Strathmartine Road, Dundee; J. Taylor, 127 Revidge Road, Blackburn.

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WHILE WAITING FOR A 'BUS.

THOUGH, perhaps, it isn't altogether fair to tell the story, yet it is really quite too good to keep.

Besides, its recital at this time is particularly *à propos*.

She came from Devonshire—just where, I did not learn. Two things attracted my attention to her. In the first place, she was extremely lovely, and the man who cannot appreciate a woman's attractiveness is not much of a man.

Her hair wasn't like "spun gold," but it was a beautiful burnished brown and when the sun caught its wavelets the effect was all the more alluring.

Her eyes were big, brown and bright. They beamed with intelligence and goodness. They reminded me of Whittier's couplet:

How brilliant and mirthful the light of her eye,
Like a star glancing out from the blue of the sky.

He was rather an indifferent young man so far as good looks went, but I suppose what he lacked in that respect he made up in brains.

They stood on the pavement of a crowded London thoroughfare, waiting for a 'bus.

"Oh, Henry, here comes our 'bus now," she said in tremulous, but very sweet tones.

Henry knew it. He wasn't blind to that fact. Yet he was blind to the fact that several interested people lounged by and too eagerly drank in the conversation of the couple.

"Let it come; there are others," he replied somewhat recklessly.

"Why, Henry, you are using slang," she murmured, turning a pair of mildly shocked eyes upon him.

"By no means," he hastened to reply. "Intone the last clause of the sentence in the sense that I meant it, and you will see that you have erred."

Her lips moved; she was repeating the sentence. Then she smiled brightly.

"You are quite right," said she.

"I thought you would think so," he smiled back. "Do you know that I have something to say to you, Helen?"

The rich, warm colour that had suffused her velvety cheeks fled for an instant and then rushed back again.

"Indeed?"

There was a little pathetic quaver in her voice.

"Yes. Can't you guess?"

She shook her head negatively.

"No," she faltered.

"I—I——"

"Paper, sir?"

"Yes, yes; give me half a dozen."

"Henry," she said a moment later, somewhat reproachfully, "we really must take this 'bus. Papa and mamma are waiting for us."

"We'll take the next one," he answered desperately. "On an omnibus I should have no opportunity to—to—and besides, when we get home your father and mother, for the time being, will effectually exclude every possibility of——"

"Oh, Henry," she cried agitatedly.

"It's true," he said, in a tense voice. "You know, Helen," he went on hurriedly, "that ever since I can remember I have at all times expressed a most fervent——"

"Henry, if we don't take this 'bus now, mamma will never forgive me. You know that I promised to be with her at 4.30."

"Fervent—fervent. Ah, yes, Helen, a most fervent fervency. No, I don't mean that, dear. I meant I have expressed at all times a most intense love for you. Your beauty, goodness, grace—yourself in its entirety—all have buoyed me up with constant hope. My love for you has been the one bright guiding star of my life. Helen, without you——"

"Oh, Henry," she murmured, undecided whether to cry or smile and half doing both, "how can—can—we miss that 'bus. Just think——"

"Yes, just think," he said excitedly, "just think how overpowering my love for you is! Without you I wouldn't care to live."

"Jove, he's got it bad," said one of the loungers *sotto voce* to his companion.

"He's having a struggle with himself," said the other. But Henry heard them not.

"I have tried in vain to tell you how much I loved you ever since we came to London," Henry continued.

The ordeal was having a disastrous effect upon him. He was getting warmer and warmer every minute, and the starch in his collar was disappearing like ice under the rays of a hot sun.

Helen evidently began to pity him. A tender look crept into her eyes.

"Poor boy!" she murmured. "And do you love me so much?"

"I couldn't tell you in a thousand years how much I love you, dear Helen," he vowed.

"If your love for me is not a passing fancy——"

"Passing fancy! My stars, it's cast iron reality. I can't forget you. Will you be my wife, Helen? Tell me now or never, Helen."

He was very much agitated now, and he looked it.

"If I give you an answer, will you promise me to take the next 'bus?"

"Yes, a million of them."

"Well, my answer is——"

She leant forward and whispered something into his ear. I did not learn what it was, but it made Henry the happiest man in all London at that particular moment.

He almost broke into a cheer.

No doubt he wanted to hug and kiss her then and there.

A moment later he helped her on to the 'bus, and they were whisked away.

A. J. Meister.

If a burnt child dreads the fire, why does a person who has been singed by Cupid's torch so often have a lingering regard for the old flame?

She: "Why, I'm not ready to marry, Mr. Freshman." He: "Will you let me know when you are?" "Certainly, sir. I'll send you a wedding-card."

She (sternly): "What was that noise I heard in the hall early this morning when you came in?" He (hastily): "It must have been the day breaking, my darling."

". . . I'm so happy," she said. . . . "Ever since my engagement to Charlie the whole world seems different. I do not seem to be in dull, prosaic London, but in——" "Lapland," suggested the small brother.

She: "Papa says that when coming to see me you must not come in a 'bus any more." He: "Really! Does he expect me to walk all this distance?" She: "Of course not. He says all he asks is that you will come in a carriage, hired by the hour."

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START TO-DAY.

The Great "Pass-It-Along" Scheme.

FIRST AWARD, £10. SECOND AWARD, £5. THIRD AWARD, £2.

SIX AWARDS OF 10/- EACH.

(A)

INSTRUCTIONS TO THE COMPETITOR WHO SENDS THIS COPY.

When you have carefully read these rules, put an ink line round the instructions in the next column, write your name and address in the space at the foot of this page*, and in the next column; wrap up this copy of SHORT STORIES in a wrapper, fix a penny stamp on it, and post it to a friend of yours whom you think will help you. Then wait until the copy is returned to you.

All you need do is to send out your copy or copies of SHORT STORIES and wait until they come back to you with the names filled in.

The first prize will be awarded to the person whose copies of SHORT STORIES contain the greatest number of names of people to whom the copies have been sent, provided that the wrappers which carried the copies of SHORT STORIES through the post to each person accompany the list.

It is not necessary for you to know the people whose names you will find on your list when your copy comes back; they will, of course, be the friends of your friends.

There is no absolute necessity to write a letter to your friend explaining the scheme, but if you did so it would carry more weight.

HOW TO SEND IN.

Keep the wrappers as they are sent to you, and when this copy comes back send all the wrappers, together with this copy, to the Editor of "Short Stories," 17 and 18 Henrietta Street, London, W.C., in an envelope marked "PASS-IT-ALONG," to arrive not later than Thursday, August 7th.

NOTE.—Competitors may send out at the same time any number of copies of this issue.

The Editor's decision is final, and readers may enter only on this understanding.

(B)

INSTRUCTIONS TO THOSE WHO RECEIVE THIS COPY BY POST.

This copy of SHORT STORIES has been sent to you by a friend who is interested in this competition and who wants to win one of the prizes offered. When you have read this announcement write your name down in the space provided, and then forward this copy *at once* in a penny wrapper to a friend of yours. If you have no friend to whom you can send it, return the copy of the paper, *together with the wrapper in which you received it*, to the original sender.

If the original sender of this paper (whose name and address is written at the foot of this page) wins the first prize, *you* will receive £1; if second prize, *you* will get 10s. The paper must be returned to the original sender on or before Saturday, August 2nd.

You must at once return the wrapper in which this copy reaches you to _____

_____

(Competitor must insert here his or her name and address.)

IMPORTANT.

Fill in your name at once and post it on the day this is received. If you keep it longer it will lessen the chance of the original sender securing the first prize, as the paper will not be able to get into so many hands within the time limit.

If you receive this copy on Saturday, August 2nd, fill up your name and post it at once to the sender, whose name appears at the foot of this page.

Why Not Try Yourself?

If you want to enter for this competition yourself, and win one of the prizes, get a copy of SHORT STORIES from your newsagent at once, and follow the instructions marked "A."

This offer will be repeated in SHORT STORIES for August 9th. (the next number but one), when another £20 will be offered in awards.

Those to whom this copy is sent sign here.

	NAME.	ADDRESS.
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Those who sign here will get £1 each if this wins first award.

*Name and Address of Competitor.....

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Brothers in Misfortune.

"YES," boasted an Englishman in the West, "I have Tudor blood in my veins from my mother's side of the family, and Plantagenet blood from my father's." "Is that so?" said a citizen. "My blood is a little mixed too. My grandfather was a Jersey tenderfoot, an' my grandmother a Digger Indian squaw. We're both half-breeds, stranger. Shake!"

Her Transient Glory.

JACK: "What colour would you call Miss Flitt's hair?" Jess: "Now, really, I haven't seen her for a week or two."

A Distinct Advantage.

SHE (haughtily): "I beg your pardon, sir; you have the advantage of me." He (jauntily): "I should say I had. I am the fellow you jilted ten years ago."

Too Quiet.

LADY VISITOR: "That new girl of yours seems very nice and quiet." Mistress of the House: "Yes, she's very quiet. She doesn't even disturb the dust when she's cleaning the room."

Laid up for Repairs.

HIS MOTHER: "What are you moping about the house for, Tommy? Why don't you go over and play with Charley Pinafore?" Tommy: "'Cause I played with Charley Pinafore yesterday, and I don't s'pose he's well enough yet."

The Terrors of Pride.

MRS. VOKES: "Mrs. Crummer has a terrible cold just now." Mrs. Gilleland: "How did she get it?" Mrs. Vokes: "By wearing a fur-lined jacket." Mrs. Gilleland: "Impossible!" Mrs. Vokes: "Not at all. She had to wear it open so that people could see the lining."

Always Early Now.

A WOMAN cured her husband of staying out late at night by going to the door when he came home, and whispering through the keyhole: "Is that you, Willie?" Her husband's name is John, and he stays at home every night now, and sleeps with one eye open, and a revolver under his pillow.

Extremes.

AGENT: "What was the matter with your last place?" Domestic: "The couple had only been married a month, and I couldn't stand the love-making." Agent: "Well, here's a chance in a house where the couple have been married ten years." Domestic: "That's too long; I like quiet and peace."

She Soon Learnt French.

LADY (to a French governess): "I am shocked to find that my daughter has been receiving letters in French from a young man." Governess: "Pardon, madame, it is only my little ruse to cheat mam'selle into study. When she would reply to an unknown lover—a Frenchman—how quickly she will learn my language!"

A Sufficient Testimonial.

COOK (just leaving): "I should like to ask you for a written character." "Why, what am I to write, you idle, good-for-nothing creature? You surely don't expect me to say you gave satisfaction?" Cook: "You need do nothing of the kind. Just say that I stayed with you three months; that would be the best character you could give me. Every missus in the place knows you."

Know what it Means.

INQUIRING CHILD: "Papa, why do people cry at weddings?" Papa (abstractedly): "Most of 'em have been married themselves."

A True Aim.

MISTRESS: "How is it I saw a soldier hugging you in the kitchen last night?" Maid: "I don't know, ma'am, unless you were peeping through the keyhole."

More Convenient.

HARRY: "When I get to be a man I'm going to let my whiskers grow." Mamma: "Why so, my boy?" Harry: "Then I won't have only a little bit of my face to wash."

Spoilt.

LOVING WIFE: "You do love me, don't you, Frank?" Fond Husband: "Love you? Why, I believe that I would be ass enough to marry you a second time if I had the chance."

Wherein it Lies.

A MAN never realises the superiority of woman so much as when he is sewing on a button without a thimble, pushing the needle through one half of the way, and pulling it through the other half by hanging on to it with his teeth.

Quite Safe.

FRIEND (after dinner): "Your little wife is a brilliantly handsome woman. I should think you'd be jealous of her." Host (confidently): "To tell the truth, Simpkins, I am. I never invite anybody here that any sane woman would take a fancy to."

Thrice Spoken.

FLORENCE: "That Miss Howard must be very popular. She said she had three proposals in one evening." Bertha: "That's just one of her tricks. I'll bet that it was that stuttering Tom Burton, and he always says everything over three times."

Art Realism.

LITTLE VISITOR (pointing to a large oil-painting): "Whose picture is that?" Little Hostess: "She was my mamma's great aunt. I never heard much about her, but I think she was a school-teacher." "Why?" "See how her eyes follow us about."

A Complexion Improver.

MRS. EARLYBIRD: "This is a pretty state of things. Here I have to get up at three o'clock in the morning to let you in." Mr. Earlybird: "All on your account, my dear. I read in a paper the other day that nothing improves a woman's complexion so much as early rising."

Wouldn't Harmonise.

"MY dear, don't you intend to invite Mr. and Mrs. Green to your party?" asked Mr. Biller. "Certainly not." "Why not, my dear? They are good friends of ours." "What if they are? I am going to invite Mr. and Mrs. Brown." "Well, can't you invite the Greens as well?" "Why, John Biller, you shock me with your taste. Brown and Green in my parlour together! Why, next you'll be asking me to wear blue and yellow. I declare you men have no idea whatever of harmony."

Preparations.

PETTED DAUGHTER: "Papa, what has come over you? I never had a wish you were not anxious to gratify, and you even anticipated my wants, and handed me money for all sorts of things I hadn't even thought of. But now I have to ask you for every penny I need, and you growl and grumble, and ask if I think you are made of money, and you rail at women's extravagance and invariably ask me what on earth I did with the last cheque, or sovereign, or half-crown you gave me. Don't you love me any more?" Papa: "My darling. I love you as much as ever, but you are soon to be married, and I am trying to gradually prepare you for the change."

OUR THRILLING NEW SERIAL.

OUT OF GREAT TRIBULATION.

By HENRY FARMER.

The Thread of the Story.

A BELT full of diamonds has been stolen from a safe belonging to Mr. Mansfield, a wealthy banker, by Seaton Revelle (who is a friend of the banker's) and an accomplice named Benjamin Beard. Revelle accuses Alec Scarsdale, who is in love with Esther, Mr. Mansfield's daughter, of the crime, and he is sentenced to sixteen years' penal servitude.

Mr. Crump, late Chief-Inspector at Scotland Yard, feeling sure Scarsdale is innocent and Revelle is guilty, determines to prove the latter's guilt.

Mr. Mansfield as fully believes in Scarsdale's guilt as does Esther in his innocence, and his friendship for Revelle increases. Revelle constantly visits the banker's house in an endeavour to win Esther's love, but so far has not prospered at all. While talking with the girl one day, Mr. Mansfield's new maid, Vance, enters the room with a tray bearing cups of coffee. No sooner does she catch sight of Revelle than she drops the tray, and, pointing to Revelle, screams: "That—that man is *my* husband!" But Revelle, by sheer force of will, compels her to acknowledge her mistake.

At about this time Esther and Mr. Crump are walking together when they observe Vance about to throw herself into the reservoir. Crump stops her just in time—he and Esther taking her back to The Woodlands. Later on she is placed in the county asylum.

In the meanwhile Scarsdale manages to pass through several letters to Esther to which he receives replies full of hope and affection. On account of an assault upon a brutal warder, however, he is to be removed to Wrackam Convict Prison, an establishment famous for its hard discipline.

A charity concert is now announced, in which both Esther and Benny are billed to take part. Revelle, of course, is present; so also is Mr. Crump. It is while returning from this concert that Revelle proposes to Esther but is refused.

The great balloon incident now approaches. There is to be a grand *fête* in Lord Normanhurst's grounds, the chief and closing event being a balloon ascent by Mr. Seaton Revelle. Everything goes well till two horsemen arrive with the news that Vance has escaped from the asylum.

Acting upon Crump's advice they go straight to the reservoir, but fail to find the missing girl. The search is given up at nightfall. Shortly before nightfall Revelle makes his ascent. A storm, however, compels him to come down, the anchor touching ground on a neighbouring common just where Vance is waiting for him. The girl clings on to the anchor, and Revelle, quickly making a terrible resolve, throws out a number of sandbags, and the balloon again rises and continues its flight till Warham reservoir is reached. Just as the balloon is passing over the water Revelle cuts the anchor rope.

Vance's dead body is found next morning, Mr. Crump being informed of the discovery while walking with Esther.

Mr. Crump examines the body and finds that a leg is broken, evidently by a fall. The coroner's jury return a verdict of "Found drowned."

Mr. Mansfield thinks it best that Esther shall leave Warham for a little holiday. It is while changing at Roxeter Junction *en route* for Gurlston Bay that Fate brings about a meeting between Esther and Alec, who is on his way to Wrackam. An impassioned scene takes place on the platform. Arrived at Wrackam Prison, Scarsdale suddenly recognises one of the warders.

A FAMILIAR FACE.

FOR a second, warder and convict stared at one another without speaking. The recognition was mutual. The last time Alec Scarsdale had seen the man he was wearing the uniform, not of an assistant warder, but of a police-constable—he was one of the two men who had arrested him on that fatal night when John Mansfield's house had been robbed.

The warder was the first to break the silence. With a jarring laugh he turned to the other warder, and pointed at Scarsdale.

"An old acquaintance," he said; "before I left the force I had the honour of running him in. Well, I'm blessed! Who'd have thought that Number 35 should turn out to be Mr. Scarsdale—that was!"

Unfortunately for Scarsdale, the man, like the late assistant-warder Pettigrew, was a bully, and he had it in his power to inflict misery on him, in that he was familiar with the details of his past life.

The hot blood rushed to Scarsdale's face. The sight of the man had recalled the past with a merciless vividness—that horrible night when that nightmare of an accusation had been hurled in his teeth.

"I often get news from Warham," went on assistant-warder Belton, "I've one or two friends there who keep me well supplied with information. Out of sight, they say, out of mind!"

Scarsdale understood the insinuation, but he did not stir, did not speak. He had made up his mind, however great the provocation might be, to endure in silence. He was dominated by one thought—to pass through the remaining period of Special Orders without a breach of prison discipline. A breach of discipline, however slight, might mean the imposition of another six months of Special Orders. He felt that such another period would be more than he could bear; that it would break him, bodily and mentally. Even under ordinary circumstances he knew how slender were the chances of escape. Under Special Orders there were none!

The days that followed were little less than a continuous duel between warder and convict. Assistant-warder Belton seldom entered the cell without making some reference to the past. It was during this time that the real heroism of Scarsdale's nature shone out, for there is more heroism in restraint than in aggression. But the strain was terrible. Again and again he prayed for strength to endure. He kept a reckoning on his prison slate of the days that yet remained to be spent under Special Orders. Every evening, just before the lights went out, he ticked off a day, and thanked God that he had passed through it clear of report, then prayed that the future day might be as the last. The strain showed itself in a newly-developed nervousness. Sometimes he would

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OUR THRILLING SERIAL. YOU CAN BEGIN TO-DAY.

wake in the silent watches of the night, bathed in a cold sweat, and feverishly tick off on his fingers the days that yet remained!

One morning, when Belton entered his cell, there was a peculiar look of triumph on his coarse features. Scarsdale stood erect at attention, his hands by his sides, the correct attitude of a prisoner in the presence of a warder. Belton glanced round the cell in the hope of being able to find fault. But everything was in perfect order—tins and utensils polished and shining like silver, the bedding carefully and neatly rolled up. Belton advanced a step, and stood immediately in front of Scarsdale.

"I've heard a bit of news to-day, 35," he said slowly, "that ought to interest you. It's come from a part of the world that used to be well acquainted with you!"

He paused for a moment as if expecting Scarsdale to speak, but he remained motionless, though his lips and fingers were twitching. Only those who have experienced the isolation of convict life can realise how a prisoner craves for news of the outside world.

"It's from a friend of mine that lives at Warham. It's a piece of news that will be sure to interest you!"

Warham! Instinctively Scarsdale thought of Esther. Was it something about her?

He knew that the man who stood before him, a malicious grin on his features, was capable of doing anything to torture him. He took a backward step, then steadied himself. The sickening thought that perhaps Esther was ill, or something had happened to her, had flashed across his mind. The thought loosened his tongue.

"What is it?" he gasped. "Bad news?"

"Oh, dear no! Good news. It's about Miss Mansfield!"

The man's coarse, jeering tones maddened him. The old light flashed from his eyes; then, with an effort, he steadied himself.

"Is she well?" he gasped, almost inaudibly.

"Well, yes, of course she's well, and so she ought to be, seeing that she's gone and got engaged to be married!"

Belton's face lit up with a cruel grin of triumph. He had got home at last.

Scarsdale reeled back like a man who had been dealt a stunning blow, and leant against the wall, staring wildly before him.

Esther, the woman whom he loved with all his heart and soul; the woman in whom his belief was infinite, Esther who, but a brief while ago, had whispered to him as he held her in his arms, "Till death!" No, no! It was all a lie; a cruel, torturing lie. He would stake his soul upon that. And yet——

"Yes," went on Belton remorselessly, "and the happy man's Mr. Seaton Revelle. The engagement's the talk of Warham!"

A mist had formed in front of Scarsdale's eyes. The cell seemed to be whirling round him. Seaton Revelle—the hound who had marred his life! The very mention of his name with Esther's seemed to contaminate it!

Belton was fairly satisfied, but Scarsdale was not thinking of him now; he was thinking, in a confused sort of way, of Esther, imagining Revelle beside her, whispering in her ear, perhaps persecuting her. He did not hear the cell door slam to. He covered his face with his hands. At that moment, had the Prince of Darkness been at his elbow to barter with him, he would have sold his soul for freedom!

"Till death!"

The whispered words were ringing in his ears again! If it were true, if so soon Esther had forgotten him, then the world was a lie; life was a lie; Heaven was a lie! Calumny, rumour might assail his belief in the woman he loved, they could not shake it! The belief that had helped him to endure the tortures of imprisonment, of the punishment-cell, was strong within him still.

But—oh, to be free now! Like a caged animal he paced the cell. His belief in Esther was untouched, unscarred by doubt, but to think of that hound beside her, perhaps persecuting her, a man of vice, capable of robbing a man of his freedom, a woman of her honour—to be beside her too, to protect her! That was why he clamoured for freedom!

The thought of escape literally predominated him. If only he could see Esther for a day, for an hour, they might take him back then.

Escape! Again as he'd done so often before, he clambered up to the barred window.

Never had the yearning for freedom been so great, so terribly intense as it was at that moment!

WHAT CRUMP FOUND ON THE COMMON.

"Found drowned!"

The inquest on Alice Vance, formerly parlour maid in the service of John Mansfield, Esquire, and a late inmate of the county lunatic asylum, was over. An open verdict had been returned on the same day that Esther Mansfield left Warham with her father for Gurlston Bay—the day of her meeting with Alec Scarsdale at Roxeter Junction. It had been unnecessary to summon the banker as a witness.

Groups of whispering men and women clustered outside the Crown and Cushion, where the inquest had been held. To some it was as clear as a pikestaff. Though there was nothing to show how the poor woman found her way into the water, she had evidently taken her own life. Others shook their heads. There was an element of mystery about the sad business. The doctor, in giving his evidence, had made the rather startling statement that one of the woman's legs was broken. Had she fallen in the dark, and broken it as she made her way to the water? Had she, despite the injury, managed to reach the edge? Yet, even if this were the case, how was it that she was found so far from the bank? Some said that the craving to live must have seized her after she had reached the water; that, for all the broken limb, she must have made a desperate bid for life in the dark! The coroner himself had advised an open verdict. There was no direct evidence of foul play; but it was mysterious, very mysterious!

Crump had ultimately decided not to attend the inquest; but he was represented by Tom Jackson and Fred Wilton. It was always the little man's policy to keep himself in the background as much as possible. It was at the Crown and Cushion, close upon a year ago, that his real identity had been betrayed, and though since then he had made a considerable alteration in his personal appearance, he deemed it advisable to be on the safe side. Moreover, it was quite likely that Railton, otherwise Tomlinson, might be present. He felt that he could rely on his representatives to bring him a very accurate account of the proceedings. On the previous afternoon he had paid a visit to the reservoir. The place was deserted, and he had spent some time there. He had made a very careful examination of the bank from which it was supposed that Vance must have entered the water, and had jotted down one or two notes on the back of an envelope.

"I shall miss her very much," the little man said to himself, thinking of Esther, as smoking his pipe he leant over the rails outside Woodbine Cottage, "but I'm very glad to think that the dear young lady is well out of the place!"

He was staring in front of him very thoughtfully when Pollie issued out of the cottage, and, creeping up behind him, plucked his coat tails.

He turned, and a kindly smile chased away the shadow that was on the homely face.

"Well, Pollie, what is it?"

"Oh, Mr. Penworthy, are you very busy to-day? 'Cos if you wasn't, I should like to take you for a walk on the common!"

The little man chuckled, amused at the child's old-fashioned manner.

"That's very nice of you, Pollie. Nothing that I should enjoy more; but I'm afraid that I couldn't come just now, as I'm expecting someone; but—well, I ought to be working this afternoon; but suppose I don't! Suppose we get grand.

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mother to pack one or two things in a basket for us, and you and I, Pollie, will have a quiet little picnic on the common—just our two selves, eh? How does that strike you?"

Pollie clapped her hands with glee.

"Oh, lovely! And I'll go and ask grandmother at once!"

The child scampered back to the cottage.

"It'll do me good!" said the little man. "I'm feeling altogether depressed. This poor woman's death has upset me very much. It is extraordinarily mysterious. Of course, even if proof were to hand that Mr. Seaton Revelle was Jim—and I have very little doubt in my own mind on that matter—he would be able to prove an *alibi*. He was either actually up in the balloon at the time that the poor woman met her death, or at Ocklington, where he came to ground, and stayed at the inn there. That is what he would say! But does it follow that because he ascended from the Tower grounds and descended at Ocklington that he was in the air the whole of the intervening time? Might he not have descended somewhere under cover of darkness? There was a general impression among the people in the grounds that he intended, if possible, to descend on the common. Of course, the aeronaut is largely at the mercy of the currents. It is frequently a case of a man proposing and the wind disposing. Unfortunately I know about as much as Pollie does about balloons; but, provided he was well supplied with ballast, I take it that by getting rid of ballast, he could atone, as it were, for the loss of gas entailed in coming to ground, and rise again. Therefore—I don't say that it happened—there is nothing impossible in the theory that he might have descended somewhere!"

The little man shifted his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other. The puzzled expression, that, since the grim discovery of the previous morning, had frequently shown itself, was again upon his features.

"You may call it absurd, my dear fellow," he said, mentally addressing an imaginary person, "but to me, bearing in mind the poor creature's broken limb, her distance from the bank, and the fact that there was a stretch of deep water in between her and the shallow water in which she was found, to me it looks almost as if she might have been dropped into the water from a great height. Perhaps it is the height of absurdity to allow myself to entertain the idea for one moment; but I am at present suffering from balloons on the brain!"

At that moment Tom Jackson, in mufti, hove in sight. The little man's eyes brightened.

"Ah, Tom, my lad, is it all over?"

"Yes. A verdict of 'Found drowned!'"

Crump's keen little eyes were resting on a decided swelling on the young constable's forehead; then they noted that the knuckles of his left hand were cut.

"Fred couldn't come along with me," went on Jackson, "and I ought to have been here sooner."

"Tom, my lad," said Crump, "were the swelling on your forehead, and those cut knuckles obtained in the execution of your official duties?"

Jackson coloured up a little.

"Well, no! It was a little bit of private business. Do you know what they're saying in the village?"

"No."

"That Miss Esther's engaged to Seaton Revelle!"

Crump's mouth tightened up.

"And you, Tom, I take it, have been punching someone's head for making that statement!"

"No, not exactly; but the fellow who told me that, made a disrespectful remark about—about Miss Esther, and I asked him to come somewhere where it wasn't quite so public, and repeat the remark. And he did!"

"And I do hope, my lad," said Crump quickly, "that you gave him a downright good hiding?"

"Fairish!" said the young constable modestly, as he glanced down at his cut knuckles.

Crump beamed.

"I don't believe in excessive pugnacity, Tom; but there are times when a man is called upon either to give, or take, a good hiding. And I'm very glad to think that you did the giving, not the taking!" he patted him on the back. "Now tell me about the inquest!"

The little man listened most attentively to the account, and asked a number of questions.

"Mind you," said Jackson, "if it hadn't been for the coroner, I believe the jury would have brought it in suicide. There was some shaking of heads; but that's the opinion of most folk. And I suppose, now that it's all over, we shall hear no more about the matter!"

Crump did not answer. But he was not at all sure in his mind on that point.

"Any other news?" he questioned presently.

"I met Railton on my way up here. He again repeated his invitation to drop in and see him one evening at The Firs. He said that he could offer me a good cigar, and a really good drop of whisky! They generally can, these valets. Mr. Faversham, it seems, came a spill yesterday off his bicycle, and is altogether queer to-day. And Revelle told Railton that possibly he might be going away shortly."

"He didn't say where, did he, Tom?" questioned Crump sharply.

"No. Railton suggested that, if his master did go away, perhaps Fred and I might drop in one evening for a little supper, and a game of cards after!"

Tom Jackson winked.

"Both of us would only be too delighted, said I!"

"Revelle may be going away!" said Crump, half to himself, shaking his head. "I hope that he is not going to Gurlston Bay!"

"So as to be near Miss Mansfield?" said Tom quickly, and with a little tightening of his strong hands.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised, Tom!"

"And she can't abide him!"

"But she is playing her part very bravely, and cleverly, and she is fighting for the man she loves. I hope sincerely that he is not going to Gurlston Bay, Tom. I have been congratulating myself that for a brief time at least she would be right away from everything calculated to recall painful memories."

"Jove!" whispered Jackson fiercely. "When I think of Mr. Alec, and of what's she's suffering, it makes me feel I'd like to have my fingers round the throat of that scoundrel at The Firs!"

"I should infinitely prefer——"

Crump stopped short.

"What?"

The little man shook his head. He had almost said—"I should infinitely prefer to put a rope round his neck!"

"Tom, I quite understand your feelings; but we must both of us take great care not to allow our personal bias to get the better of us. When we feel inclined to wring anybody's neck, let us think of Miss Mansfield, and the splendid example she is setting us. I regret to say that in my days of active service I came more than one most lamentable cropper through being mastered by my own personal feelings!"

The little man shook his head sorrowfully. His expression was suggestive of a man who had failed in his career. Tom Jackson smiled to himself; then, after some further conversation, returned to the village.

After meditating for some time, Crump returned to the cottage, and interviewed Mrs. Cobb on the subject of taking Pollie on to the common that afternoon. It was about three o'clock when they set out, Crump carrying a basket, and Pollie clinging on to his hand and chattering away happily. They made their way to the common through fields and by-paths.

"Enjoying yourself, Pollie?" asked Crump.

"Aren't I just!"

The little man stopped for a moment, and surveyed the wide stretch of common.

"Now where shall we camp? What about yonder?"

He pointed to a green hollow surrounded by gorse bushes.

"That'll do beautiful! And after we've had tea, you'll tell us all about the handsome prince and the beautiful princess, all over again, won't you?"

"Certainly I will!"

Reaching the spot, Pollie helped Crump to unpack the basket.

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OUR THRILLING SERIAL. YOU CAN BEGIN TO-DAY.

Soon a small kettle was humming on a spirit lamp. A serviette outspread was the tablecloth.

"Now, Pollie," said the little man chuckling to himself, "you must be the hostess!"

There is no game dearer to the heart of a child than the game of "Pretend!" So Pollie pretended that she was a grand lady, and that Mr. Penworthy was a visitor who had called upon her, and whom she had invited to stay for afternoon tea.

"Only one lump of sugar, please, Lady Mary, I never take more! What a refreshing thing a cup of tea is, to be sure! And what a glorious place you have here!"

Crump had thoroughly entered into the spirit of the thing. He had assumed a perfect society manner, and was playing his part with an earnestness that gave a reality to the "Pretend." Pollie was in the seventh heaven of delight.

Tea over, he gravely asked Lady Mary's premission to smoke. And then Lady Mary, suddenly lapsing into Pollie again, suggested a game of hide-and-seek.

Crump having promised on his word of honour not to look, Pollie darted off to hide. It was quite remarkable what a long time it took the late Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard to find her.

But when he did find her, he found also something else.

A small torn fragment of dark material clinging on to a bramble. It was part of Crump's detective creed never to neglect trifles. Almost mechanically, with no particular object in view, he unhooked the stuff and examined the material.

His small, keen eyes brightened. It was a piece of coarse, dark blue serge.

When, on the previous morning, he had been alone in the shed where they had laid Alice Vance, he had taken note of the material of the poor creature's dress. It was a coarse, dark blue serge—the material of which the regulation asylum dress was made.

"Your turn to hide now," said Pollie, a little impatiently.

"One minute, Pollie dear," said the little man.

He gave a comprehensive glance round; then, taking out a pocket case, carefully folded up the piece of serge and put it away.

So Vance, at one time or another, had been on the common. The inmates of the asylum were not allowed beyond the grounds. It was not likely, therefore, that any other inmate but Vance had been there. The point could be conclusively settled by comparing the fragment with the dress worn by the poor woman. The fact that, at one time or another, she had been on the common, might not be of the slightest importance; yet, on the other hand, it might.

"Now, Pollie, it's my turn. Promise not to look!"

"I promise. I'll go behind that bush."

Pollie scampered off to a bush that was some little distance away.

"Now, no cheating," cried Crump.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Penworthy! Come and see what I've found! It's a bag of something. It's too heavy for me to lift!"

Crump hurried to the bush behind which Pollie was crouching.

On the ground lay a long, thinnish bag. Some sand lay sprinkled round on the turf.

Crump's eyes were twinkling like stars.

"Ballast!" he said to himself. "Balloon ballast, if I'm not very much mistaken! This is indeed interesting. The balloon carrying Mr. Seaton Revelle was at some time or another over this spot, quite close to where I have found a fragment that I firmly believe to have been torn from the dress of Alice Vance; but, of course, at present there's nothing to prove coincidence of time. Yet it is curious, very curious indeed!"

"But what is it?" questioned Pollie.

"A sand-bag, Pollie dear!"

"But," went on Pollie, with inquisitiveness so characteristic of children, "how did it come here, and what's it for?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if it hadn't dropped from the skies, Pollie."

"You're making fun of me," said Pollie, pouting her lips a little.

It was characteristic of Crump that, though at that moment the presence of Pollie hampered him somewhat, he showed no signs of impatience. His manner was kindliness itself. At the same time Pollie was a child, observant, and liable to prattle. He glanced at his watch. He would take Pollie back to the cottage, and return. He wished to investigate the neighbouring ground very thoroughly.

"Well, Pollie, if it didn't drop from the clouds, perhaps it fell from a cart or something. And now, my dear, I think perhaps we ought to be getting back."

He picked up the sand-bag and dropped it among the gorse, where it was hidden from view.

Pollie's lower lip fell.

"But you haven't hidden yet, and you've never told me the story of the Prince and the Princess."

Crump patted her cheek consolingly.

"Very well. I'll go and hide, and I'll tell you the story as we go home, how will that suit?"

The lower lip was braced up again, and the suspicion of tears vanished from the child's eyes.

So Crump concealed himself, and was ultimately found by Pollie, and on the way home told her, in his delightful way, the fairy tale.

And when they reached the cottage, Pollie said:

"Stoop down!"

He obeyed. Pollie put her arms round his neck, and gave him a great hug and a smacking kiss.

"'Cos it's been such a happy afternoon, and I've enjoyed myself so much!"

"Bless her dear little heart!" said Crump to himself as he made his way back to the common. "But I don't think she can have enjoyed the afternoon more than I have. Children always give me happiness. I love 'em!"

He gave a little sigh as he recalled a past memory—a memory of what might have been. He was not without his moments of loneliness. Then the lips tightened, and the wrinkles deepened round the small eyes. He was the detective again.

Reaching the spot where he had concealed the bag of ballast in the gorse, he took paper and pencil from his pocket, and, having consulted a small compass attached to his watch-chain, sketched with considerable accuracy a map of surroundings; then marked in two crosses, one where he had found the sand-bag, the other where he had found the fragment of dress. He jotted down the date. Then he proceeded to wander round in the near vicinity, his keen eyes glancing to right and left.

"Hullo," he said to himself presently, "who or what pulled up that bit of gorse by the roots?"

Quite a large bush lay at his feet.

"Might it not have been an anchor or such a grappling iron that is carried by a balloon. But be very careful, my good fellow! You've got an idea in your head. Beware of trying to shape your facts to fit the idea!"

He pulled out the pencilled map, and added another cross. He was moving on again.

"Hullo! Another sand-bag!"

Out came the map again. Another cross was made.

It was quite dark when Mr. Penworthy returned to Woodbine Cottage. Pollie was in bed, but Mrs. Cobb, hearing her lodger enter, stepped out of the kitchen.

"I just wanted to thank you, Mr. Penworthy, for the treat that you gave Pollie this afternoon. She's gone to bed over such a happy little girl. But I'm afraid you're spoiling her with kindness!"

"We're only children once in our lives, Mrs. Cobb," said the little man.

He was carrying two bags over his shoulders, evidently of considerable weight, for the perspiration was rolling down his face

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"But, good gracious, Mr. Penworthy, what have you got there, to be sure?"

In private life Crump was the most truthful of men, but Crump, the detective, searching to find the truth, was frequently compelled to lie.

"Seeds, Mrs. Cobb, seeds! I'm so hot, not because they are extraordinarily heavy, but because I have carried them a longish way!"

And Crump carried his "seeds" into his sitting-room, and locked them away in a cupboard.

Presently he lighted his pipe and lapsed into a brown study.

"I can prove nothing at present," he said half aloud, "but it's beginning to look to me very much like——"

He pursed up his lips and stopped.

The word "murder" remained unspoken!

* * * * *

"Found drowned!" said Benny Beard as, looking very much out of sorts, and his head bandaged, he sat in the cosy little smoking-room at The Firs. "That was the verdict, Marquis!"

His voice was a little hushed, and his eyes watched Revelle rather uneasily.

The Marquis was leaning back in an easy-chair, watching the smoke ascend from his cigar.

"It should have been 'suicide'!" he said. "But, well, you know there's a prejudice about bringing in that verdict, and they avoid doing so whenever it's possible."

"Curious, though, that the poor creature's leg should have been broken."

Revelle fastened his eyes on his partner's face.

"Look here," he said, "suppose we drop the subject. It's not a pleasant, or a particularly cheering one!"

"Certainly, certainly!"

A silence followed. It was broken at last by Benny. He did not appear at all at his ease.

"I say, Marquis, this sort of life doesn't altogether suit me. Hobnobbing with dukes and duchesses is all very well for you, but it's a cut above me. And I tell you straight, I feel more of a cur than ever since Esther Mansfield behaved like a brick to me yesterday, after I had come that cropper. She's getting on my nerves more and more. It's no use you trying to kid me that she's forgotten him. She hasn't, in the least. Thank Heaven, she's gone away for a bit, and I shan't be meeting her, and feeling those dark eyes of hers on me. I believe she suspects us, I do, 'pon my soul. And—well, the long and short of it is that, if you've no objection, I shall be getting back to London shortly!"

"And what," said Revelle slowly, "about the Normanhurst business?"

"I'll stand out, if you don't mind. You're a host in yourself, Marquis; besides, you've got that inestimable jewel, Railton!"

There was rather a spiteful ring in the last words. Benny was decidedly jealous of Railton.

"Don't talk rot!" said Revelle sharply. "You're each invaluable in your respective ways. Your spill's shaken you. If you want a change, go to London by all means for a fortnight, but I shall expect you back. I'm off myself in a few days. This place is relaxing. I want a breath of sea air. The Normanhurst business can stand over till I get back, though funds are beginning to run precious low. There's going to be no standing out on your part, my dear Benny. Great Scott! You're not going to show the white feather at your time of life! Railton, yes! His nerve's gone—hasn't got the pluck of a mouse. But I didn't think it of you, Benny!"

Seaton Revelle had played the right card. Benny shuffled rather uncomfortably in his chair. He was a moral coward. He possessed a much weaker will than the man who sat opposite him, and at the same time he was hampered by his conscience.

"Come, Benny, we've gone too far along the road together to part company now."

"Very well, Marquis, but after we've brought off the

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Normanhurst business. I shall clear out from here. The climate doesn't suit me, and if I lived a hundred years I shouldn't feel comfortable in Esther Mansfield's presence!"

Revelle stared up at the ceiling again.

"You don't think you'd care to come away with me, instead of going to town?"

"Have you made up your mind where you're going?"

"Well, yes! Gurlston Bay!"

Gurlston Bay, where Esther Mansfield was, where the white chalk cliffs rose up sheer from the sea, where the wonderful caves were, in which, years back, Crump had played at smugglers with a little boy and girl.

"No, thank you!" said Benny. "I'd rather not, if you don't mind. Some other time, perhaps. Marquis, you're about as clever as they make 'em; but you're making a big mistake where Esther Mansfield is concerned."

"Am I? I tell you what, Benny, I'm prepared to double that bet!"

A FAMILIAR VOICE AND FRAGMENTS OF A CONVERSATION.

What Esther had suffered during the journey from Roxeter Junction to Gurlston Bay—her father sitting silent, pitying her, yet his heart filled with a consuming rage towards the man who had brought so much misery into her life, his sense of decency outraged by what had taken place, the sight of his daughter in the arms of a convicted felon—what Esther suffered, God alone knew!

A carriage awaited them at Gurlston Bay Station, and they were welcomed by their host, Mr. Walters, a genial, old-fashioned gentleman. At Gurlston Hall, a fine house, set in a wooded estate, and some half-a-mile from the white cliffs that skirted round the bay, there were more welcomings and greetings and introductions. There were several guests staying at the place. Somehow Esther managed to get through it all. But, at last, having pleaded weariness from the journey, she found herself alone in her room. Then she wept bitterly, and prayed! She seemed to see him again in the hideous dress, haggard-faced, old, with grey-streaked hair!

"Oh, God, be merciful!" she whispered in her agony. "Be merciful!"

She did not go down to dinner that night, and when her father went to see her, her hands were burning hot, and two bright spots blazed out on her cheeks.

A doctor was sent for. For a week a fever raged within her, and she kept her bed. During that time two crumbs of comfort reached her—kindly, cheering letters from Crump, preaching the gospel of hope and patience. Her host and hostess did everything in their power for her comfort. Her father was tenderness itself—but he believed in the guilt of the man she loved!

It was a warm, sunny morning, and they had moved Esther from her bed to an easy-chair near an open window from which the distant sea was visible. The morning paper lay on a table close beside. She was alone. Occasionally voices reached her from the lawn below. She was looking very wan and pale. For some time she stared out wistfully at the distant sea; then, almost mechanically, she picked up the paper, and opened it out. Her eyes wandered listlessly over the columns.

"CONVICT'S BRAVE CONDUCT.

"C 35 Saves a Warder's Life."

C 35! It was Alec's number! She had seen it on his sleeve at Roxeter Junction! The print was dancing before her eyes in a confused blurr. With a little cry, she pressed her hands to her forehead, as if to steady herself! At last the dancing letters shaped themselves into words:

> "On Tuesday last a prison warder attached to Wrackam Gaol, whilst on duty on St. Marvin's Island, where the convicts are engaged in fortress-building, fell into the water owing to the collapse of the staging on which he was standing. The unfortunate man could not swim, and must have been drowned but for the prompt and heroic conduct of Convict 35 who, in spite of the fact that his legs were chained, plunged in to his rescue, and contrived to keep the man afloat till assistance could be rendered. Both men were taken from the water in an exhausted condition. Convict 35 proves to be the Alexander Scarsdale who, as most of our readers will probably remember, was sentenced to a long term of penal servitude for the robbery of his employer, Mr. John Mansfield, the well-known banker. According to all accounts, he has proved a most refractory prisoner, and was wearing leg-chains in consequence of a steel implement having been found in his cell, evidently smuggled in with a view to attempting escape. He was also undergoing punishment for a violent assault on a warder. But it is to be hoped that this undoubted act of heroism will be rewarded with a remission of a portion of his sentence."

The paper fell from Esther's hand. Her heart was throbbing fiercely, proudly. He had proved himself a hero! Oh, if it would only come true! If only the cruel time of imprisonment were shortened. She dared not hope for more than this. Dare she even hope for as much?

On the lawn below, Mr. Walters and some of his male guests, comfortably esconced in deck-chairs, were smoking their cigars and chatting. Now and again stray sentences floated into the room; but Esther did not hear.

"A very charming fellow . . . staying with my friend, Winter . . . turns out to be quite an intimate friend of Mansfield's. I asked Winter to bring him over here some time!"

Mr. Walters was speaking. The broken sentences floated into the room.

"Esther, my dear child, do you think you will be feeling strong enough to get out into the open air for a little while to-day?"

Esther started at the sound of her father's voice. She had not heard him enter the room. Her thoughts had been far away.

"Yes, father. I'm afraid that I am spoiling your holiday. I'm feeling ever so much better. I shall be able to get as far as the garden quite easily this afternoon!"

"Hullo, here is Winter . . . has brought him with him!"

It was Mr. Walters' voice again.

"How are you, Winter . . . how you you do, sir! Very pleased to meet you . . . old friends of yours staying with us . . . Mansfields . . . nothing else to do . . . dine with us . . . sorry, exceedingly sorry to say . . . far from well . . . most anxious about her; but better to-day . . . thankful to say!"

There was a moment's pause; then another voice, singularly clear and distinct:

"Indeed! I'm most awfully grieved to hear that!"

This time Esther heard. She gave a sudden shiver.

"Father!" she whispered. "Is — is Mr. Revelle *here?*"

"Yes, Esther, I've only just heard. He's staying with a friend of Walters'. Quite a delightful surprise!"

Was there no getting away from this man whom she loathed? Instinct told her why he had come to Gurlston Bay. She shivered again, for a feeling of indefinable fear, as well as of loathing, had come over her.

"Esther, my dear," said her father, "you're cold, you're shivering. Let me shut the window!"

As he moved towards the window, their host's voice again penetrated in.

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"Smugglers, oh, dear no! . . . not for over sixty years . . . but the caves are quite complicated . . . a man might hide himself in them for days without being discovered . . . a regular rabbit-warren . . . as a matter-of-fact an escaped convict. . . . "

John Mansfield closed to the window sharply, and glanced uneasily at Esther.

Her white lips were twitching.

"Yes?" said Seaton Revelle, who had been questioning Mr. Walters on the subject of the caves.

"He escaped from Jetland Bill. He must have been in the caves some four days. Poor fellow, he was not taken alive. It is doubtful if his hiding place would have been discovered; but he must have slipped over the ledge in the dark. They found him on the rocks below dead, and in his convict's dress!"

"By the way," said one of the guests, "talking of convicts, did you read in this morning's paper about that fellow Scarsdale—we ought to have Mansfield, he could tell us something about him—saving a warder's life. Awfully plucky act. The fellow is undoubtedly an awful wrong 'un; but, 'pon my word, he deserves a free pardon. Not many of us would care about jumping into deep water, with heavy leg-chains on. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if they did give him a pardon!"

Seaton Revelle tugged rather nervously at his moustache.

"Jim feared neither God nor man!" so the poor woman who now lay in Warham churchyard had said.

Revelle was no coward; but even the remote prospect of Alec Scarsdale being liberated was not pleasant to him.

"I see," he said, changing the subject, "that there's been another fall of the cliffs!"

"Yes. They're very unsafe!" said Walters. "I'm going to have boards put up warning folk from going too near the edge. They are particularly dangerous after wet weather!"

At that moment a young gentleman, a towel thrown over his shoulder and just back from the beach, where he had been enjoying a morning swim, sauntered across the lawn.

"Do you know," he cried out, "there's a rumour in the village that that fellow Scarsdale whom we were reading about in the paper, has escaped from Wrackam prison. The report seems to have come from the police-station!"

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THREE TESTS.

DECEMBER 1, 11 p.m. I wonder if all rich girls are afraid of being married for their money? I know *I* am, and when John Everard proposed to me to-night, I was so afraid, that it was my money he was proposing to, rather than myself. I refused to give him any answer at the time, resolving to put his love to the test. If he is proof against the tests I shall apply—and I hope he will be!—I shall be perfectly happy.

I have written a letter and signed that wicked actress Marie's name to it, asking John to meet her at the stage entrance at ten-thirty to-morrow evening. John has an engagement with me. If he goes away early, pleading business or a headache, I shall know he has gone to keep the appointment he supposes she has made with him. Then I shall never, *never* have anything more to do with him.

December 2, 12.5 a.m.—I am so happy! It is midnight, and John has just gone—I am almost convinced that he loves me for myself alone. I watched him closely all the evening to see if he would in any way betray the fact that he had received a letter from that actress. Judge of my surprise when, about an hour before he went home, he took that letter from his pocket and handed it to me! There was a time, he confessed, when he would have kept an appointment like that. "But that was in the days I call my 'wasted yesterdays,'" he said, smiling half sadly. "Now, there is nothing in all the world that is one-half so dear as the hours I spend with you." Wasn't that splendid? I am very anxious to find out what kind of husband he would be. The next time he calls I will tell him that I think a woman is most selfish who demands that a man give up his club and his card parties. If he agrees with my views I shall know that he would cling to *that* part of the old life, and I should be *so* miserable if I were left at home alone!

December 4.—John is home. He called last night and he stood the test beautifully. He told me he thought if a man really loved a woman, he would have no desire to go to the club or anywhere else she couldn't go. As for himself, he said, if he loved a girl enough to marry her, he would love her enough to want her with him *always*. It seems almost wrong to test him further, but I will just once more. He has invited me to go to the theatre to-morrow evening. In the morning I shall write him a little note and tell him I am in trouble and cannot go. When he comes in the evening to find out what the trouble is, I shall tell him that my lawyers say they are afraid all the fortune left me by dear papa has been lost and that I am practically a poor girl.

Then I'll watch his face. If he loves me for myself he will not care. If it is for my money, he will show it.

December 5, 2 a.m. — I am so happy! John is absolutely true and doesn't care for my money. When he got my letter yesterday afternoon, he came at once to me. I tried to look a picture of pathetic woe, and told him what my lawyers said. In a moment after he had heard it I was held tightly in his arms and he was kissing me! We are to be married Christmas day. I told old Mr. Sharpe, my lawyer, about it yesterday, and how he laughed! He is to write me a letter stating that by strenuous efforts that fortune has all been saved, and I will show it to John. Won't he be surprised!

My maid Nannette sits over there by the fire, half-asleep It's too bad to keep her up any later, so I won't write longer but I'm so happy, I know I won't sleep a wink.

* * * * * * *

"Nannette," said Mr. John Everard, as he stood in the reception-room on Christmas day, waiting for his wife to come down from her room, "Nannette, to-night I start on my wedding tour. Here are the three letters you wrote me, and I wish you would accept this ten pound note as a little confidential Christmas gift. There—go now, your mistress is ringing for you."

And Nannette smiled and answered the bell.

F. Harvey.

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By MADGE MORRIS.

[I shall be glad to answer, to the best of my ability, any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to me personally, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

Are Love-Letters Sincere?

"PAULA" is puzzled. She has recently met a very nice boy, who appears to be very fond of her. She constantly receives from him love letters worded in such a way as to suggest that she is all the world to him. But when she meets him from time to time, his manner is far from ecstatic. He is, in fact, rather cold and reserved in her presence. Do I think his professions are really sincere?

I do not always believe in the sincerity of love letters. People often use language in correspondence which is utterly at variance with their real sentiments. I think "PAULA" would do well to take her friend's letters just as nice, complimentary tokens of admiration, not as his heart's outpourings. She should judge his feelings towards her more by his manner, his attentiveness, and his general actions.

The Fidgety Husband.

"LUCIA" has married a man who is terribly erratic. He often takes her to towns where he has business, and when there, instead of making some sort of provision for her amusement, he keeps her waiting about outside offices and shops until she is weary to death, and, if anything disturbs him, attributes it to her presence. What is a wife to do under such circumstances?

As a married friend of mine put it, husbands always try and put their wives in the wrong. The only safeguard is for a wife to anticipate this, and contrive to put them in the wrong first. I think "LUCIA" should take up a very strong line when she visits with her husband. On arriving at the town, she should ask him at what definite time he will be through his business, and make an appointment for that time, arranging in the meantime to amuse herself independently of him. Before he has a chance of abusing her, as she says he does, she should start matters by charging him with neglect, and placing him on the defensive. I have known this system adopted with excellent results among my married friends, and strongly recommend it to "LUCIA."

A Case for Candour.

"LEONARD" at one time was somewhat in love with a certain young lady. After some months of courtship, she deliberately threw him over without any apparent reason. "LEONARD" believes her to be the merest flirt, who trifles with men so long as they amuse her and no longer. Now the other day "LEONARD" was surprised to meet her in the society of a very close friend of his own, who told him in a whisper that he "was very much gone" on the girl. Ought "LEONARD," with his own experience, to warn him of her character?

"LEONARD" would be doing no harm in telling his friend just what has occurred in his own case. Girls who thus trifle with men's affections are not entitled to any particularly chivalrous reserve on the part of those they have jilted. "LEONARD" would rather be doing a service to his friend to tell him his own experience.

The Presumptuous Stranger.

A FRIEND of "JESSIE" knows a certain man. This man has constantly seen "JESSIE" with her friend, but does not know her personally. The other day he met her out, and going up to her, introduced himself, claiming acquaintance with her friend as his excuse. Should "JESSIE" have accepted his conduct, or ignored it?

Had the man been a gentleman, he certainly would not have introduced himself, at any rate unless he had reason to believe "JESSIE" was agreeable to the acquaintance. "JESSIE" should under any circumstances have told him that while she had no reason for not wishing to know him, she resented his familiarity in introducing himself. If he wished to know her, their mutual friend would use her discretion about making the introduction.

But I must make some allowances for him. There are certain circumstances under which a man is justified in speaking to a strange lady without an introduction, such, for instance, as occasions on which he is able to be of assistance to her. "JESSIE" should make her own decision as to whether in the case in question the man had such justification.

Are Lovers Bores?

I AM afraid "HENRIETTA" is a very heretical young lady. She actually confesses that James, her sweetheart, bores her. When they meet, of course there is the usual affectionate hand-squeeze, followed by a kiss of adequate length and fulness, but when the conversation part of the business comes on he bores her to death.

The fact is, James is very attentive to his business, and persists in talking to her about it until she is weary to death. Of course she is interested in his business, but finds little details of his daily life quite uninteresting. Do I think that her feeling so disposed towards him indicates that she does not really care much for him?

It seems very strange to me that "HENRIETTA" should be in such doubt as to whether she really is fond of James. I should think she herself must best know that. However, I construe it as a very bad sign that she finds his conversation wearying. However much they may enjoy that hand-squeeze and kiss, things look rather black if they have not sufficient in common to be able to talk together. As a love-doctor, and not a wizard, therefore I must tell "HENRIETTA" that I don't think she does care very much for James, or she would not find him a bore.

A Case for Waiting.

"PHILIP."—Yes, you would be doing wrong in taking your sweetheart from a good home to share with you the sum of a pound a week, which you say you see little prospect of increasing. Wait until you are in a better position, unless, of course, your wife is able in any way to earn something at home to help keep the house with. Certainly it would not be wise for her to go out to work after you are married, seeing that she has not done so before. No, "PHILIP," I fear you must do what a *lot* of others have to, and that is wait.

Jack's Choice.

"JACK."—Evidently the girl you met subsequently was the best suited to you. It often happens that young men go on under the impression that they are fond of a certain girl, until someone else appears who "sends them crazy." It certainly is a delicate position for the latter girl; as naturally it would be extremely unpleasant for her to appear to be stealing you away from her friend. But these unfortunate things must continue to happen as long as human nature lasts. Someone must be mortified. All one can do is to see that the mortification is as gently conveyed as possible.

Printed by HORACE COX, Bream's Buildings, London, E.C., and published by C. ARTHUR PEARSON LTD., Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

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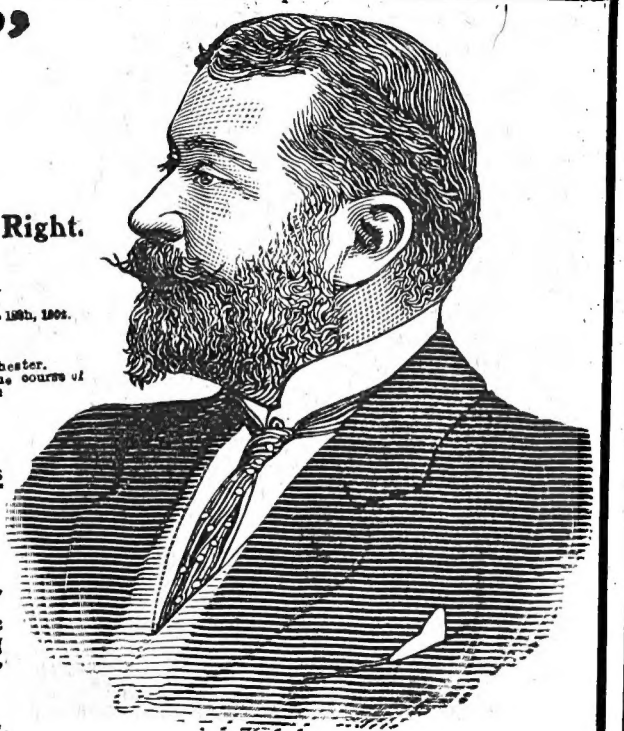

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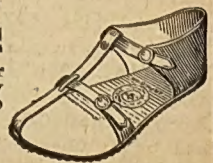

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